

PORT SUNLIGHT

It's almost impossible to explore the garden village of Port Sunlight without your attention being, quite rightly, diverted to its founder. The intrinsic linking of the created and its creator may seem an obvious route of research. However, as a professional landscape photographer, my own personal interest in the picturesque architecture and aesthetic landscape of the village became, uncharacteristically, distracted by the person behind the vision.

Born in 1851, William Hesketh Lever (later Viscount Leverhulme) was the son of a Bolton based wholesale grocer. Leaving school aged 16 to join the family business, his entrepreneurial shrewdness became evident with the purchase of an unprofitable soap and cleaning products factory in Warrington. This acquisition was a joint venture between himself and his younger brother James, which heralded the beginning of the Lever Brothers soap empire. New production techniques and ingredients were introduced, with products such as Sunlight and Lifebuoy soap, Lux soap powder and Vim cleaner (brands which I personally remember) being sold and produced worldwide. Making Lever Brothers one of the first ever multinational companies.

The fortune accumulated from his business acumen would soon make William one of the richest men in England, providing him with the financial resources to expand his manufacturing plant to the Wirral peninsula and the building of Port Sunlight. It is also worth mentioning that William married Elizabeth Hulme in 1874, whom



Sundial in the Diamond Garden

he had known since childhood. Elizabeth had lived in the same street and attended the same church school. Both Elizabeth and the church would guide him in future ethical business decisions, especially in regards to the welfare of his employees at the new Port Sunlight plant. With a few exceptions, like that of the Cadbury Brothers Bournville factory near Birmingham and Saltire model village in Shipley, William's vision for Port Sunlight was considered an elaborate and an unnecessary indulgence for his workforce. Indeed, many fellow entrepreneurs and industrial tyrants of the period disliked William and James. They would have preferred them to keep their workforce in the customary social squalor and academic ignorance, associated with the post Industrial Revolution.

William's utopian village would not only provide his workforce with all the modern amenities of the era, including indoor toilets, but other buildings and land were set aside for children and adult education, physical activity, recreation and Christian worship – some of which required compulsory attendance.



Lady Lever Art Gallery

Everything his workforce could need was provided within the boundaries of the village - everything that is except a public house. The initial plan to encourage (and perhaps enforce) an alcohol free community was eventually curtailed when, after much persuasion, William allowed the Bridge Inn (initially a temperance inn and hotel) to become licensed and sell alcoholic beverages. Many would argue that he was protecting his employees from the perceived evils associated with alcohol consumption. Others may infer that he was controlling his labour in the form of paternalistic capitalism. If anyone did not conform to the strict rules of employment and social behaviour, they would be dismissed. No job meant no house, and homelessness would ensue for the whole family.

It did occur to me that perhaps William's foresight of providing his employees with a clean and safe place to live and work, was nothing other than astute business acumen. A stable and contented workforce would surely yield greater productivity.



Dell Bridge and Lyceum

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Providing improved living conditions at Port Sunlight could have been achieved with far less grandeur. Rows of featureless houses, with the same internal refinements, would have proved adequate to house a workforce, saving William a small fortune. Over thirty architects were involved in the creation of Port Sunlight village with elaborate, and costly, architectural design features being added to the humblest of dwellings. Whether intentional or not, William wasn't just building a village for a workforce, he was conducting a social experiment and by doing so, creating a legacy which would outlive his industrial empire. Port Sunlight would provide a constant physical reminder over his and Elizabeth's positive contribution to much needed social reform. The village preserves the memory of William's philanthropy and entrepreneurial achievements, perhaps above and beyond that of other equally notable social pioneers of that period.



Trees in Blossom at Wood Street

It is difficult to sit through the multimedia presentation on William at Port Sunlight Museum, without having a slight tear in the side of your eye. You leave the museum with the feeling that mankind is not as cruel as you originally thought. However, and there is always a however, William's rags to riches biography is not without shame and failure. Indeed, a similar experiment to rehouse and industrialise the Isles of Lewis and Harris (in Scotland's Outer Hebrides) failed dramatically. William, who now owned the islands, needed its residents to follow his commands blindly, foregoing their heritage and crofts for the sake of providing labour for the newly created fishing industry. Many of the crofters refused and the ensuing resistance (and even some rebellion) assisted in William's eventual decision to terminate his substantial investment. His ambition to industrialise the islands, rehouse its workforce and harvest the catch from the surrounding seas became a spectacular, and expensive, failure. There were other factors that culminated in this venture becoming a financial catastrophe. The complete account for this period of his life is worthy of deeper exploration, and provides an interesting insight in Williams personal character and commercial thought processes. The ill treatment of the workers in African plantations, who harvested ingredients for his soap manufacturing, is an abhorrent



Port Sunlight Museum

contradiction to the apparent compassion for his Port Sunlight employees. Perhaps we are expecting too much. Would it have been feasibly possible for one man to reverse mankind's inequality and brutality, especially on a global scale? Addressing, or at least confronting, social reform on the home front was at least an achievable objective, and one in which William was undoubtedly a positive catalyst.

Against the flow of other industrialists, Lord William Leverhulme was directly responsible for the introduction of a 40 hour week, a workers pension plan, the provision of a workers hospital, museum, library, schools, auditorium, gymnasium, clean and secure housing, and numerous charitable acts (many outside the boundaries of Port Sunlight), all of which are testament to his generosity, humanity and vision.

Visiting Port Sunlight will not only impress the observer but, as it did for me, it fuels a desire to learn more about this distinguished and honourable man.



Spring Time at Causeway Garden