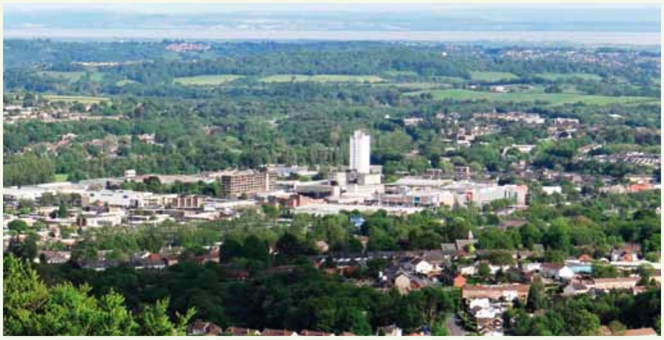
Garden cities

Stan Edwards looks at garden cities/new towns by focusing on just one to demonstrate that idealistic concepts may succeed, but not in the way that they were planned

Our choicest plans have fallen through,
our airiest castles tumbled over,
because of lines we neatly drew
and later neatly stumbled over. **Piet Hein**



Cwmbran – Garden City of Wales

In the light of the government move towards garden cities (new towns) as being a means of fulfilling an **immediate housing need,** I could not help reflect on the characteristics of one I know well. Having worked for **Cwmbran Development Corporation (CDC)** for nearly twenty years (until 1985) I have been able to view its early (and ongoing) development from close quarters. Cwmbran was labelled Garden City of Wales due to two in its lineage of General Managers – James McComb and Ronald Menday – who came from Welwyn Garden City, where McComb had been the General Manager. A banner from the front page of a CDC mid 70s promotional brochure confirms Cwmbran as Garden City of Wales. There was an overt desire to replicate Welwyn's "garden city" success in Cwmbran, which, although Cwmbran is generally considered a success today, on reflection much is not by following closely the original design, but by adapting to change. The greatest challenge in developing in phases is that the outcome based upon **cumulative impacts** tends to vary greatly with what was originally planned.

No social science experiment

Those who studied economics were **frequently** warned that although economics is a social science, there is no laboratory way of testing a theory, as with the physical sciences. It is often better to re-read an old book than to read a new one. Garden cities followed by new towns were in their time ways of fulfilling a need for housing in a pioneering way, necessitating the development of a whole raft of ancillary and associated uses. The main point to be made is that in the construction of any small town/settlement, such as Ebbsfleet, the lessons to be learned from Cwmbran and other new towns are immense. The greatest of all is that no matter how well things are planned, or how planners and politicians are mesmerised by looking gooey-eyed through rose-tinted glasses at historic garden cities, they will avoid the reality that whatever is produced in the end will have been shaped through unintended consequences of external and internal impacts on the original plan.

In this vein, we will look at four sectors in Cwmbran – **housing, employment, retail and transport** – all closely intertwined. It is also useful from an urban land economics viewpoint to consider the combined **inextricably linked factors** of Structure, Succession and Situs[1]. Situs analysis in particular considers in detail Activities, Associations (clustering, agglomeration), Accessibility (movement between people services and goods) and the internal/external wider environmental Area in which they all sit. This being the case, it is only possible to give cameos of the main components in building the garden city of Wales.

ORIGINAL
CWMBRAN MASTER PLAN
Minoprio & Spencely

Structure – physical plus transport and demographic

The above picture shows the extent of the original designated area of **3160 acres (1279 ha.)** in 1949, based around three existing villages in the eastern valley of (then) **Monmouthshire** between **Pontypool** and **Newport**. The proposed physical structure comprised main residential areas of the town to be grouped around the town centre. Each neighbourhood had its own social, educational and shopping facilities, with each area fed by a district distributor road. **A green lung of parkland** formed the central recreation along side the river, **Afon Lwyd**, flowing north to south through the town. Industry was also placed as central as possible – close to existing industry and the centre. However the economic, social and environmental structures changed, adapting to imposed circumstances in terms of:

- the Beeching axe on the valley branch lines
- failure of the industrial employment base
- change in household composition and formation
- change in housing tenure
- demographic change - not just the "47 boomer bulge" traversing over time
- an increase in car ownership
- local government reform and authority HQ location
- removal of funding
- changes not just in shopping location, but changes in patterns of retailing
- a push for exansion
- the M4 at Newport, built in the late '60s
- health service changes.

Land acquisition
Many new towns used the **New Towns Act CPO powers** extensively, perhaps the most famous being Milton Keynes's encounter with Myers. However, apart from some strategic **post Section 11** situations, most of the extensive tracts of future residential land in Cwmbran were acquired by agreement – I could not see such a similar situation today. It was **post-1980** that CPOs were used most to deliver **essential highway infrastructure**, notably Cwmbran Drive, connecting Cwmbran with the trunk road network. For the those interested in CPO powers, there were three sections to this particular CPO:

- ministerial CPO element – Welsh Office – trunk road. Highways Act
- non-ministerial CPO element – Gwent County Council – from trunk road to the designated area. Highways Act
- non-ministerial CPO element – New Towns Act – highway and commercial elements within the designated area.

Housing

Like Ebbsfleet, the original purpose of Cwmbran was primarily housing. The need was obvious regarding the supply of new housing, to:

- replace aging terraced stock
- provision of housing for key and other workers in or attracted to the area
- recognise that in 20 years the 1947 baby boomers (BBs) would make significant demands upon the housing market.

The plan was simple enough in the acquisition of greenfield sites for the construction of housing neighbourhoods within the designated area in a clockwise direction over time, starting with the north west. Contemporaneously, the town centre was created on a phased basis. The initial population was 12000, with a target of 35000 – it is now estimated at just under 50000.

There appeared a naivety that the population would just grow, age and remain in Cwmbran, but a number of things occurred that altered the **demographic/tenure mix** in a much greater way than expected. Wales was not isolated from the other new towns in the 1960/70s in respect of a feature that also influenced the location of a number of industrial developments.

Section 11 New Towns Act 1946 – unintended consequences?
Section 11 was a feature of the Act to take care of a form of new town blight. The provision was that within a statutory period from the formation of the town, if the residents of **non-rented properties** had not been approached to sell their property to the CDC, the CDC could be forced to acquire at market value. Whereas it was perhaps **not intended to** force people out of their houses, very many residents (mainly older) took the opportunity to **compel** the CDC to purchase their **old sub-standard properties**, whilst at the same time being rehoused in **brand new rented stock**. At first this was viewed as a **nuisance factor**, but there were some interesting dimensions in terms of succession:

- old families were rehoused in new neighbourhoods
- school catchments were impacted
- old properties purchased entered the rented stock, to be brought up to standard and re-let
- the effect took place over time, so that not all the people from one area dominated a neighbourhood – the demographic mix changed, and so did the succession of property ownership
- eventually the Corporation's ownership of such properties in a concentrated area became so great, that it became an easy task to CPO the residue, and convert such into sites for industrial/employment use
- again the relocation of owners and tenants was to new neighbourhoods being developed at the time
- some acquired cottages, e.g. Garw Row, were preserved in a quality enveloping schemes.

Section 11 was in time repealed.

Sale to tenants
The other important factor impacting the housing market in the early 1970s was the **Conservative government directive** to sell rented houses to tenants at discounted prices. It is recalled that there was much **Board opposition** to this, but nothing much could be done because it was **government policy**. Many tenants took advantage, but again the initial take-up was not across the board. Those in settled areas with traditional layouts saw the advantage early on, but by this time the architects and planners were experimenting with **mono-pitched roofs** in confusing service cul-de-sac layouts in the newer phases. Having said that, the present lunacy of reducing car parking provision and access were not even considered and therefore amply provided.

Tenure mix suddenly changed, and many new owners engaged in petty turf wars over inches of boundary. On the whole, the scheme was successful in creating a house ownership culture, eventually triggering demand for houses specially built for sale, characterised by the volume builders from the 1980s onwards. Today, many of this older stock is a source of **affordable housing**, depending upon the location, layout and house type.

This was notwithstanding of course that the Corporation continued building houses for rent until the demise of the new towns in the late 1980s. However, things were changing, in that from 1980 was seen **the additional dimension of "shared ownership"** schemes. The cycle keeps turning – public rented to private ownership, and now many returning to rent, but private.

Private sector housing
Whereas the prime provision of housing had been for rent, the CDC followed closely a "Welwyn" pattern that provided:

- quality houses built for sale
- small in-fill sites for local builders
- sites for self-build plots or self build groups.

CDC houses built for sale ceased by the early 1970s, and it was only when the **New Town Corporations** were close to being wound up that the volume builders were allowed to bid. McComb had gone, but his residual influence against the early introduction of volume builders remained until the 1980s.

The neighbourhoods

The developed neighbourhoods still retain their own distinct identities, and whereas the first estates are known by their names, the residents of the later estates are quite happy (to this day) to be known by their estate development ID name and number. All the estates are constantly going through **demographic change**, whether it be from the younger generation BBs gravitation to the cheaper properties of the 1970s and 1980s, or the BBs themselves now seeking to take advantage of large equities.

Severnside study and the expansion of the designated area

In 1970, the **Severnside Study** was published, wherein a recommendation was to form a linear town from **Newport** to **Cwmbran** and **Pontypool**, injecting an additional population of 50,000. Although the CDC carried out studies on this recommendation, they were dropped due to economic and political considerations. Following this, there was a move to expand the designated area of the town. The first proposal, South Sebastapol, to the north, was abandoned in favour of Henlys (located in the south west) and an area to the south that eventually became Llantarnam Industrial Park. In its final stages, (late 1980s) the CDC sold its Henllys lands to volume builders, and a significant area to the Land Authority for Wales, which released phases to volume builders by tender over time.

In recent years, **Torfaen CBC** has struggled to provide additional housing with a project for South Sebastapol, notwithstanding the many objections to Cwmbran coalescing with an adjoining urban area to the north. Such recent developments include a social (affordable) housing requirement and low car provision, no matter what the impact on marketing. Coupled with this, the council has recently received proposals for a **450 dwelling** mixed use development to the south. It seems that the pressure is on for the Severnside recommendations to be created by default.

The old villages

These areas still retain many second and third generations of the original population, and can still relate to community and roots.

Application for Ebbsfleet?

Just as with Cwmbran there seems a **naive assumption** of retention, no migration of population, and a limit on growth. Cwmbran set out to have a **dormitory function**, with an ongoing provision for BBs. The dormitory function now has wider popular commuter application. With Ebbsfleet, there must be an assumed dormitory function, plus some local employment. In reality, it seems that over time the natural movement of growth is for coalescence with adjoining settlements, so that in such situations the "stand alone" garden city just becomes a step in a **strategic infill**.

Industry and Employment

Early on, the creation of industry and employment were not a priority. The town fared well within, with indigenous employers such as Girling, Saunders Valve, Alfa Laval, Precision Forgings (GKN) and a number of tinplate and stamping works. Additionally, there were industries in surrounding areas such a Panteg Steelworks, and eventually Llanwern Steelworks, plus BNS/ICI Fibres, not to mention the basic coal and industrial South Wales. However, in the 1960s the Corporation eventually recognised the need for quality rack-rented units (75sqm) and advance factories (2000sqm+), plus bespoke. The boom in Cwmbran came back, its Assisted Area status enabled two-year rent free periods to be granted to "suitably qualified manufacturing industries", and thereafter to expansion space. This was before the fettering influence of the EU on state aid. After its acme in the 1970s/1980s, Cwmbran was not excluded from the vagaries of the world market. Most of those industries listed above have now gone, with Precision Forgings/GKN closing in the early 1970s. PF/GKN lands were used to produce the **Springvale Industrial Estate** and the **Cwmbran Retail Park**, close to the town centre. The sad thing is that when the basic industries and those associated with them leave, everything else becomes footloose. The state aid regulations imposed by the EU have not enabled the industrial base to recover to its former glory, but Cwmbran's location and ability to retain what is left does leave a tenuous platform for growth.

Many of the units are now well over 30 years old and require review, notwithstanding that many still operate effectively, but with a much different trade pattern than in the early days.

Even the large employers like local authorities have in turn peaked and troughed in Cwmbran. Retail is however a big employer in Cwmbran and a large critical care hospital is proposed.

Application for Ebbsfleet?

The existed and predicted employment bases are fluid, and will impact on household formation.

Retail and Leisure

It is on retail, and to a lesser extent leisure, that these days the spotlight falls. A new town centre was proposed in the master plan, and it seems from records that there were concerns from surrounding local authorities at the time, but this was overridden. In the late 1960s, the same concerns were expressed for a new town at **Llantrisant**, north west of Cardiff, and there the opposition was formally successful. However, in the last 15 years, the development of nearby **Talbot Green Retail Park** and housing at **Pontyclun** has demonstrated that the market will finally hold sway, and an informal **"new town"** created by default.

Cwmbran's retail structure

The CDC's implementation of retail was simple enough, and to be fair there was no "competitive intent" with retail in surrounding towns. However, the CDC was visionary in realising that retail success was geared to convenience and accessibility, in respect of accommodating the **increased car ownership**. Key to Cwmbran's town centre retail success was a large quantity of free parking. The developed hierarchy of shopping was:

- **Pantry shops.** Each residential neighbourhood had a "pantry shop" to provide facilities as a vanguard to the provision of a neighbourhood /district centre. These were sacrificial, and could be easily adapted to residential use.
- **Neighbourhood/district centres.** Neighbourhood shops ranged from four to ten units, with a large district centre totalling 20 units – each was successful in its time, but

many have fallen foul of the ravages and fragility of the retail market. Many survived by combining units to form supermarkets – a feature that arrived in the early 60s. The early strict user clauses and cross-covenants had to be seriously revised. Turnover rents were considered to retain services in failing conditions. One centre, Llanyravon, with more than ten units, is still successful, and its features of convenience and accessibility attest to that. The neighbourhood centres declined as the influence of central retail core grew, but not just due to the growing impact of that core, but to changes in the pattern of retailing generally.

- **Reformed local retailing – the cuckoo in the nest.** Whereas there has been a failure of formal neighbourhood centres, and to some extent traditional villages, the national superstore operators, such as Tesco and Sainsbury, take advantage of a continued demand for local convenience shopping, using the muscle of economies of scale. Such stores operating locally acquire premises with parking potential. Cwmbran is not immune from such activity, and redundant pubs are a target. It is easy to identify spending leakage, but socio/economic impact upon traditional stable centre is unassessed, providing, in many cases, unwanted competition, and eventually establishing a monopolistic position. In Cwmbran a failed purpose built neighbourhood pub, the Golden Harvest, was taken over by Tesco. The Pontnewydd Inn is in transition as shown in the **pictures**. The application for the garden cities of tomorrow is that where they are formed in close proximity to existing towns/villages many establishments within those centres will immediately be threatened by national store operators. Such is **the** case where the planning system provides no protection against cuckoo egg laying.

Pontnewydd Inn 1976

Inn transition 2014

- **Central Retail Core.** The central retail core is an expanded version of the original Master Plan but even that may be considered in terms of:
  - town centre, forming the core, sitting within a one-way ring-road with four corner roundabouts
  - an adjoining retail park with the usual retail warehouses
  - expanded retail space including Sainsbury's, Aldi, Lidl, and most recently Morrisons.

  Any needs in respect of a wider range of comparison goods are accessible within 15 miles. Cwmbran town centre has evolved into a **compact multi-retail sub-regional retail destination.**

Succession in Cwmbran town centre

The town centre followed the master plan up to a point. The **retail core** was phased mainly in a "U", with the first phase in the north (Caradoc Road) designed initially as a neighbourhood for the **Northville estate**. The trick with retail phasing is balance making sure that there is not **"too much too early"** for the growing population, and not too late for the growing population to establish spending elsewhere – the usual **"chicken and egg"**. CDC's aim was the growth of convenience coupled with accessibility. As with the neighbourhoods, this was not without its pub, The Moonraker (Raker), which for many years was the established town centre pub. In the 1970s, the planned development of the town centre included quality apartments (Monmouth House) above the shops. Moving the CDC offices to the centre, as did the offices provision for growing professional firms, assisted in reinforcing spending. Cwmbran attracted **Woolco** (replaced by Asda), **Marks and Spencer** and **Sainsbury's** to its core – Sainsbury's (on its original site) was the first in Wales. A leading journal at the time (1974), *Political and Economic Planning (PEP),* stated that, *"It would not be surprising that Cwmbran soon comes to be regarded as Britain's most successful "out-of-town" (OOT) shopping centre".* PEP was right in one way and wrong in another. At the time, Cwmbran was OOT to Newport, but in the light of recent analysis, Cwmbran is regarded as one of Britain's most successful "in town" shopping/town centres. OOT is no new 21st century thing. Even post-war expanded towns impacted on their cores. Ebbsfleet will be OOT to its neighbours and they to Ebbsfleet – cross impact.

Demographic impact of '47 grey pound BBs

According to a recent survey[2], **the grey pound** now accounts for **£320billion** a year – up by **£100 billion** in nine years. Spending on food and non-alcoholic drinks rose at 5.1% a year from 2003 to 2012, and the over-50s account for **76%** of the nation's financial wealth.

This impact on Cwmbran spending cannot be emphasised enough. The issue for Ebbsfleet is that the impact of migration and economic demography on issues such as future decrease in grey pound impact (reduction) cannot be ignored.

What happened? The wider impact

In situs terms, Cwmbran's profile and activities together with associations (agglomeration) and positive accessibility features, impact a much wider environmental area. Its basic structure was planned. So what is the analysis?

Transport and Structure Change

The physical structure of Cwmbran is roughly the same as the master plan, with some adjustments for layouts and circumstances, with the addition of an expansion area and transport priorities. Although the main railway line to **Manchester and Holyhead** still runs through the town, with its own busy station, the branch lines to the valley which ran through the centre fell foul of the **Beeching axe**. Although on the one hand considered a massive erroneous decision, it had to be quickly countered with a rethink on transport, in terms of replacing rail with motor transport facilities, so that a new highway (Cwmbran Drive) would feed directly into the town centre, and on wards north/south.

In the master plan, the proposal was a highway to the east of the town centre running north/south. This remains, but not as a major route, but effectively adds to highway accessibility and permeability. Additionally, for those wishing to by-pass the town completely, a highway to the east was constructed. All, including district distributors, provide a highly effective highway network.

Succession

By succession, we mean how urban land use evolves, focusing on properties, neighbourhoods and assets over time. This process goes through **growth**, **maturity** and **eventual decline**, followed then by perhaps some kind of renewal. It is considered in terms of use, user and intensity.

Without going deeply into the sectors described above, it can be seen that they **demonstrate succession characteristics**. Finally, succession took the form of disposals of CDC's assets, when it was wound up in **March 1988**. The town centre was initially sold to **Ladbrookes**, and is now with the **Prudential**.

Industrial estates were sold off, and the housing and related assets were transferred to Torfaen CBC, with the residual rented stock now with Bron Afon Community Housing. However, both structure and succession are interlocked with situs analysis.

Situs – its proximity, connectivity and magnitude characteristics

Situs analysis explores the real estate decision-making process, focusing on the characteristics of location outlined above. In situs terms, the CDC was the space provider, but spatial needs (residential, retail, industrial transport, etc.) have to be translated into spatial solutions. In other words, the spatial user/consumer had a packet of functions translating into real estate needs, and wants them seen in terms of proximity, connectivity and magnitude.

We only have to look at the Wolves case[3] to recall the importance of these characteristics in planning and CPOs. However, these are not static, and pass through life cycles over time, translating into different spatial requirements. Ebbsfleet may have an original set of goals, but taking a lead from Cwmbran, nothing is to be taken for granted. My fear for Ebbsfleet is that there are many **lurking externalities** that have been deliberately suppressed in the thrust of gung-ho expediency – "imperious immediacy of interest" being a major factor in the law of unintended consequences. Do not get me wrong – I am in favour of a developed focus, as in garden cities and new towns – but I am far more concerned with externalities causing leakages from or additions to the settlement.

Pioneering culture

Something that may not be replicated in public sector UK today is a **pioneering culture** (it's been replaced by a heavily risk averse one). Quangos that delivered such settlements received public funding to deliver through a liberty of enterprise, provided by the chemistry of its comprehensive in-house seasoned professionals, led by acknowledged leaders, most of whom had seen WWII combat action.

Staff and Board demonstrated a desire to succeed and deliver, with a great appreciation and understanding of community needs and issues. **As an observation, it seems as though there was never felt the need for an academic on the Board.**

Summary

The Cwmbran master plan was produced in almost a *ceteris paribus* assumption, where the town would grow, and there would be no outward or internal migration, industrial or transport change.

It was not expected that the housing market would alter over time, but it did. It was almost naive to think these days that a successful retail core would not impact on surrounding towns – but it did. Neither was it expected that the traditional industrial base would collapse, but it did. And neither was it expected, almost naively, that the neighbourhood centres would decline, but they have.

The greatest of all is that because of **accessibility**, **convenience** and **free parking**, Cwmbran would become a highly successful town centre shopping area unintentionally capturing Newport's extensive valleys catchment of spending power. At the 2011 census, Newport was the third largest city in Wales, with a city population of 145,736 and an urban population of 306,844. With Cwmbran's population at around 50,000, it punches way above its weight, throwing **Reilly's [blunt] law of retail gravitation** into disarray. However, Newport centre's problems were not all Cwmbran's fault – accessibility constraints and inconvenience **sowed the seeds** of Newport's own doom (diminishing returns to agglomeration).

Whereas Cwmbran does not have its own OOT problem, it seems to be impacted to a limited extent by Newport's Sainsbury's and retail park. **It is a lesson that everything is continually in a state of flux.**

Ebbsfleet

In an attempt to avoid creeping expansion, it seems such settlements are a means of growing conurbations. My guess is that Ebbsfleet will not be fully assessed in situs terms. Yes, there will be more models than on a catwalk, but situs will not be one of the economic/planning ones appearing on the radar. There will be need in the planning of future new settlements to put in place ongoing **Cumulative Impact Analysis** in attempt to manage the final goal.

But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

The best laid schemes of mice and men not only go "aft agley", but suffer from **"imperious immediacy of interest"**. Burns knew something of unintended consequences!

Footnotes:

1. Dr James DeLisle – Washington University 1. Situs 2. Behavioural Real Estate.
2. Saga report in Time is Money, 7 February 2014.
3. R (on the application of Sainsbury's Supermarkets Ltd) (Appellant) v Wolverhampton City Council and another (Respondents) [2010] UKSC 20.

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Valuer magazine has been privileged to publish a series of articles on the compulsory purchase process and case law by expert Stan Edwards. They can be found in the member area of the IRRV website.