

Raymond Unwin (1863 – 1940)



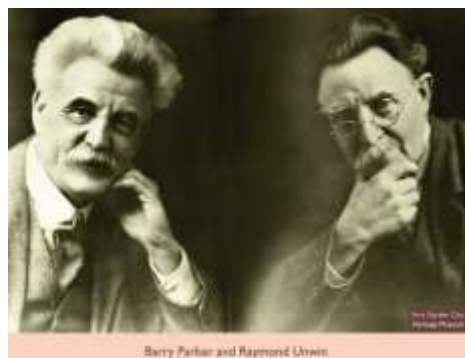
Raymond Unwin was born on 2nd November 1863 in Whiston, Rotherham, the younger son of William Unwin, a tutor at Balliol College, Oxford and his wife Elizabeth Sully. He considered entering the Church of England, as his elder brother William did, but he was diverted, to his father's disappointment, into a life of social activism.

Unwin was educated at Magdalen College Choir School, Oxford, where he became aware of the Socialist principles of John Ruskin and William Morris. In 1883, he settled in Chesterfield as an engineering apprentice at the Staveley Coal and Iron Company, and came into contact with the Socialist philosopher Edward Carpenter at

Millthorpe, Sheffield. In 1885 he obtained a post as an engineering draughtsman in Manchester where he was the local secretary of William Morris's Socialist League, writing articles for its newspaper 'Commonweal'. In 1887 he returned to the Staveley Coal and Iron Company in Barrow Hill as a draughtsman, and although he had no training in architecture, he was working primarily as an architect and was part of the Company team who designed housing at Barrow Hill, Duckmanton and Poolsbrook. At one point, he "offered to resign if bathrooms were not provided to dwellings at Allport Terrace, Barrow Hill."ⁱ

Unwin married his cousin, Ethel Parker, in 1893, the same year that he received his first major architectural commission - to build St Andrew's Church at Barrow Hill. This was completed largely alone, with some collaboration with his brother -in-law, (Richard) Barry Parker.

Parker, was staying with the Unwins at Chapel-en-le-Frith when Unwin was building St Andrew's, and designed a mosaic glass reredos for it. Parker remembered clearly the atmosphere of mutual cheerfulness and creativity: "Evening after evening, Unwin sat placing the little glass cubes in position on the cartoon I had made, in readiness for their transfer to the cement-rendered east wall of the church, while I drew and his wife, my sister, read to us!"



Shortly afterwards, in 1896, Unwin and Parker formed an informal partnership in Buxton. The early work of the practice consisted mainly of large houses influenced by Voysey, Baillie Scott and the American Gustav Stickley of which Balnagowan, Edinburgh is one of the best examples. Unwin became convinced that Arts and Crafts principles should be applied to working-class housing, and in 1898-99 they published designs for co-operative housing, Unwin also writing an important paper 'Co-operation in Building'. This was followed by 'The Art of Building A Home' published in 1901 and by a second, more developed, paper by Unwin given at the Garden City Association conference in Bournville in September 1901 which brought the commission for the garden village of New Earswick model village, near York, for the Joseph Rowntree Village Trust. These publications were followed by a tract entitled 'College Plans and Common Sense' in 1902.

In the following year the founder of the Garden City Movement, Ebenezer Howard invited Parker & Unwin to advise on the site for Letchworth and, in February 1904, Unwin won the limited competition for its layout. This in turn brought the commission for Hampstead Garden Suburb from Henrietta Barnett in February 1905 in which they worked in association with Edwin Landseer Lutyens and which opened in 1907. Their work and philosophy became well-known in America, Parker publishing thirty articles in Stickey's magazine 'The Craftsmen' between 1902 and 1916.

In 1908-09 Unwin wrote 'Town Planning in Practice' a major work influenced by German practice and J S Nettlefolds 'Practical Housing' published in 1907. Together with his advocacy of town planning legislation from 1902 onwards, it made him an international authority on housing and town planning. He organised the International Town Planning Conference held in London in 1910 and his time became increasingly taken up with public sector work. In 1911 the RIBA appointed him a delegate to the Third National Conference and American City Planning Exhibition in Philadelphia. On his return he became a lecturer at the University of Birmingham with an endowment from George Cadbury. Although these activities brought the partnership much new business, they left Parker almost wholly responsible for its management and the first steps towards dissolution were taken in 1914.

The war of 1914–1918 gave Unwin fresh opportunities. In 1915 he was seconded to the Ministry of Munitions to design the villages of Gretna, Eastriggs and Queensferry, (Mancot Royal, Cheshire) and from 1917 had an influential role at the Tudor Walters Committee on working-class housing. In 1919, he was appointed Chief Architect to the newly formed Ministry of Health, a post which had become Chief Technical Officer for Housing and Town Planning by the time of his retirement in November 1928. His most widely influential contributions to planning may be considered to be in the report drawn up by the Committee on Housing of which Sir (John) Tudor Walters was chairman (1918) and in the Ministry of Health's Housing Manual (1918), and these led to his serving on a great number of planning committees such as the Building Research Board of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research.

Unwin retired from the civil service in 1928, and from 1929 to 1933 he served as technical adviser to the Greater London Regional Town Planning Committee; and largely wrote its two reports, the first published in that year and the second in 1933.

Unwin was President of the RIBA in 1931-33, was knighted in 1932 and received the RIBA's Gold Medal in 1937. Unwin made an extended tour of North America in 1933-34 in the course of which he met the Roosevelts. This was followed by his appointment as visiting professor of town planning at Columbia University in September 1935. Throughout the later 1930s he continued to give advice to housing associations, universities and the British and US governments and was one of the founders of the School of Planning and Research for National Development with Frank Pick, Steen Eiler Resmussen and others, the preliminary meeting to set it up being held at his house. Unwin was lecturing in the USA when the Second World War broke out in September 1939. Unable to return home, he thereafter lived with his daughter Margaret Curtice Hitchcock (1899-1982) and it was at her house at Old Lyme, Connecticut that he died 28/29 June 1940 (not at her apartment in New York as sometimes stated).

List of major buildings / works:

St Andrew's Church, Barrow Hill, Derbyshire (largely alone), 1893.

With Parker: C. F. Goodfellow House, Northwood, Staffs., 1899-1902.

Co-op housing, St Botolph's Avenue, Sevenoaks, Kent, 1903-6.

New Earswick, York, from 1901.

Letchworth Garden City, Herts., from 1903.

Hampstead Garden Suburb, London, 1906-7.

SOURCES:

- *OxfordDNB, Town Planning in Practice: An Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs*
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Unwin
- <http://www.answers.com/topic/unwin-sir-raymond>
- <http://famedarchitect.com/sir-raymond-unwin/> also mentions church
- <http://www.whistonweb.co.uk/history/unwin.htm>
- http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=202214

ⁱ Elliott, Paula *Pioneering examples of industrial housing in Derbyshire 1832-1925* p86