

Housing bubbles

A self guided walk around Port Sunlight on the Wirral



Explore a radical garden village with over 900 listed buildings
Find out how the settlement was built upon soap and water
See how it was carefully designed to look after its residents
Discover how this workers' village left a lasting legacy

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Cover image: Hulme Hall © Martin Haslett

Housing bubbles

Explore the garden village of Port Sunlight on the Wirral

In the late-nineteenth century William Lever led the world's most famous soap company. Lever was a successful businessman but unlike most other entrepreneurs he believed in sharing his profits.

Lever was determined that his workers should have a decent place to live and opportunities to better themselves. To do this he employed leading architects and craftsmen to design and build a beautiful new village.



Colourful housing and planting, Port Sunlight
© Martin Haslett

The workers paid a fair rent for their homes. They had access to education, healthcare and social facilities. When they retired they received a pension. All this was groundbreaking for its time.



View towards the Lady Lever Art Gallery
© Martin Haslett

This walk explores Lever's village, Port Sunlight. Discover how Port Sunlight developed. See over 900 Grade II listed buildings. Find out how the layout was carefully-planned but shaped by the natural landscape.

Also discover how Port Sunlight's character has been protected and how the village remains a very desirable place to live.

Route overview



Practical information

Location	Port Sunlight, Wirral, Northwest England
Getting there	<p>Train - Port Sunlight is on the Merseyrail Wirral Line. The nearest stations are Port Sunlight (opposite Stop 5 of the walk) and Bebington (near Stop 21). Wirral Line services run from Chester, Birkenhead, Ellesmere Port and Liverpool Lime Street.</p> <p>Bus - Local buses serve Port Sunlight via Liverpool, Bebington, New Brighton and Rock Ferry. Alight at New Chester Road or Bebington Road to reach the start of the walk.</p> <p>Car - From the Wirral access is via the M53 Junction 4. From Liverpool use the Birkenhead (Queensway) Tunnel. Free parking available outside Lady Lever Art Gallery.</p>
Start point	Lever House, Wood Street, CH62 4UY
Finish point	Port Sunlight Village time capsule mosaic, CH62 5DP
Distance	2 ½ miles
Directions from railway station to start	From Port Sunlight railway station turn right onto Greendale Road. Pass the stone fountain and continue towards the large stone building ahead with the clock – this is Lever House (Stop 1).
Level	Gentle – a mostly flat route in a largely residential area
Terrain	The route is entirely on pavements and paved footpaths. Though most roads in the village are quiet do watch for traffic especially when with children.

Suitable for

Families – plenty of sights for all ages. Childrens' activity sheet available from Port Sunlight Museum.

Pushchairs / Wheelchairs – shallow steps at Dell Bridge and the end of the route, alternative directions provided

Dogs - must be kept on a lead in the village streets; not allowed inside the Museum

Refreshments

Tudor Rose Tea Rooms opposite the railway station on Greendale Road (next to Stop 5) serves hot and cold refreshments.

The Bridge Inn (Stop 10) restaurant serves hot meals all day.

Also recommended are the café at Lady Lever Art Gallery (Stop 15), the Tea Room at Port Sunlight Museum (Stop 17) and the Sun Lounge Café at Port Sunlight Garden Centre (Stop 23).

Toilets

Toilets (including disabled and baby changing facilities) in Port Sunlight Museum, the Lady Lever Art Gallery and Port Sunlight Garden Centre. Visitors can use facilities in Bridge Inn.

Places to visit

Port Sunlight Museum - open daily 10am-5pm. Comprehensive exhibitions on village history, interactive village trails, gift shop, tea room, childrens' activities. Nominal entrance charges.
Tel: 0151 644 6466

Lady Lever Art Gallery - open daily 10am-5pm, free entry. The collection includes Pre-Raphaelite painting, Chinese art, sculpture, ceramics and furniture. Tel: 0151 478 4136

Port Sunlight Garden Centre - open 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-4.30pm Sun. Tel: 0151 645 6244

Other information

Unilever have created a **free smartphone app** guide to the village called 'Port Sunlight - walking with William Lever'. Available on iTunes and Android.

Start and end of the route



Stopping points

- 1.** Lever House
- 2.** Lever House
- 3.** Gladstone Theatre
- 4.** Former Girls' Hostel
- 5.** Houses opposite Port Sunlight railway station
- 6.** Dell Bridge
- 7.** Bridge Cottage
- 8.** The Lyceum and bowling green
- 9.** Hulme Hall
- 10.** The Bridge Inn
- 11.** Christ Church
- 12.** Church Drive School
- 13.** The Causeway
- ...
- 23.** Port Sunlight Garden Centre
- 24.** Jubilee Crescent
- F.** Port Sunlight Village time capsule mosaic

Middle of the route

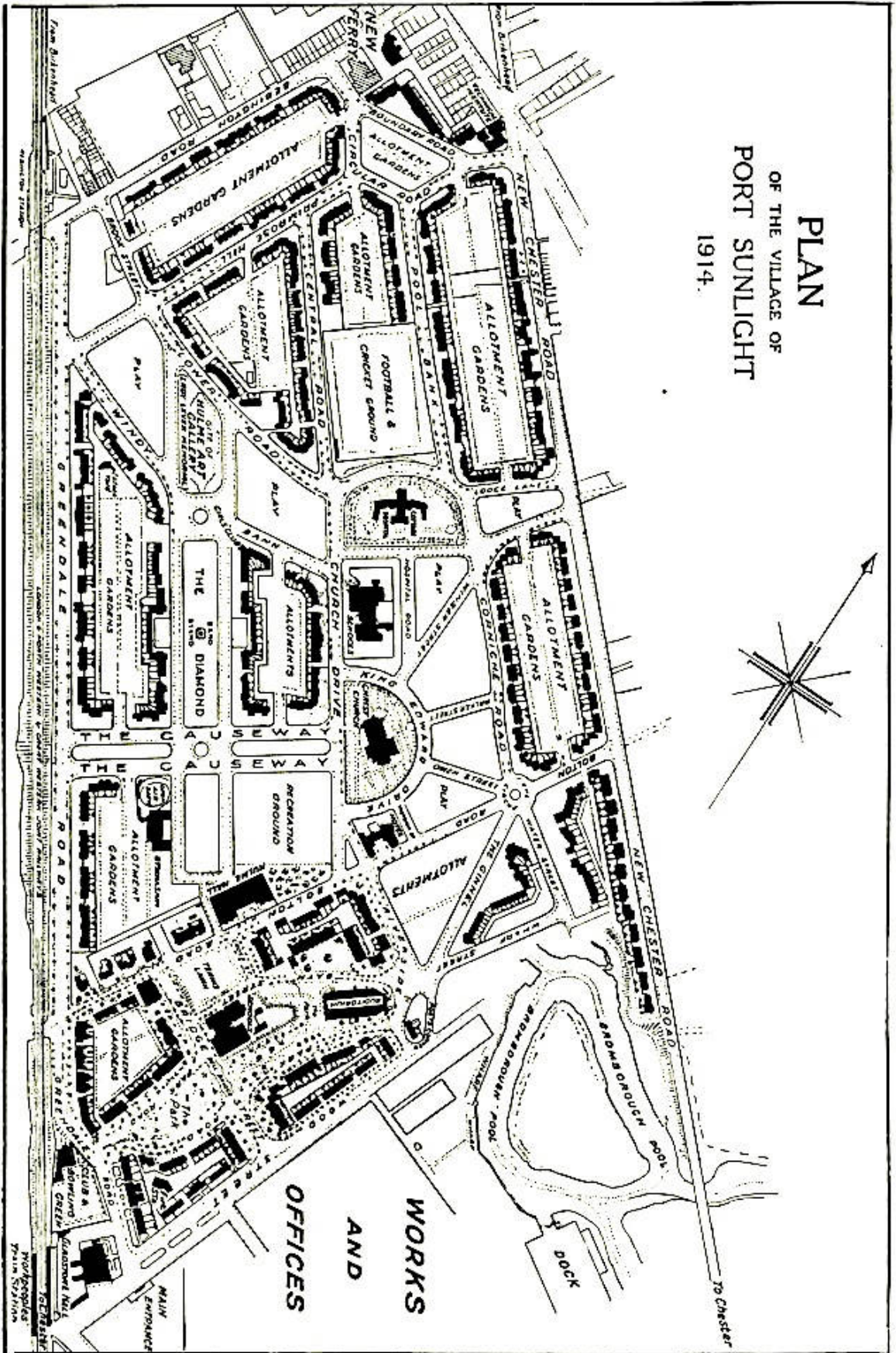


Stopping points

14. Leverhulme Memorial and Lady Lever Art Gallery
15. Tree plantation opposite Lower Road
16. Port Sunlight Museum
17. Leverhulme Hotel
18. New Chester Road
19. Hesketh Hall
20. Rear of New Chester Road / Circular Drive / Pool Bank
21. Duke of York Cottages
22. Kenyon Peel Cottages



PLAN
OF THE VILLAGE OF
PORT SUNLIGHT
1914.



Plan of Port Sunlight (1914)

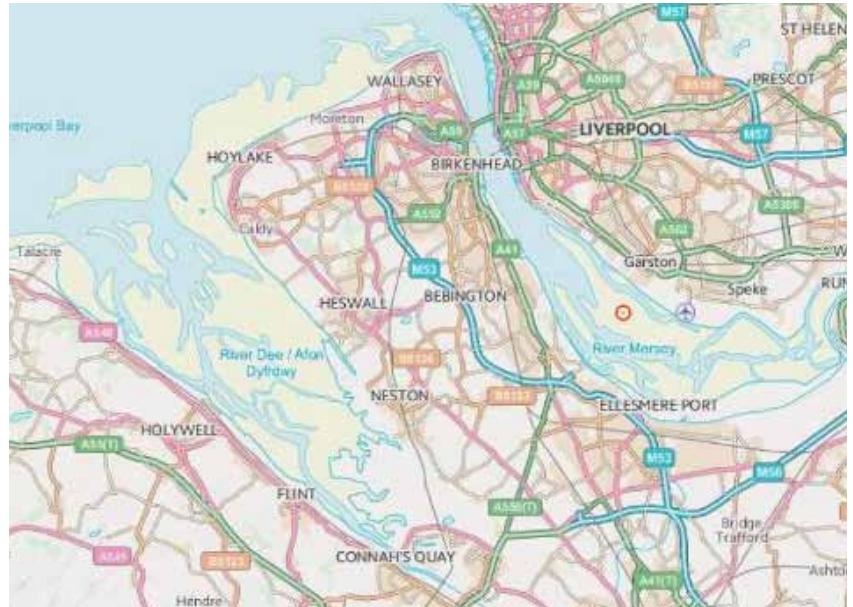
Courtesy of The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

1. Welcome to Port Sunlight

Lever House, Wood Street

The story of Port Sunlight begins in 1888 when businessman William Lever chose to locate a new factory on the east side of the Wirral. The Wirral is the peninsula between North Wales and Merseyside. It is bounded to the west by the River Dee - the border between England and Wales - and to the east by the River Mersey.

During the nineteenth century nearby Liverpool became the second most important port in the world (after London). Its prosperity was mainly based on imports and exports.



The Wirral peninsula in relation to Liverpool and the Rivers Dee and Mersey
© Crown Copyright Ordnance Survey, 2013

The wider region around Liverpool was also important for heavy industry and manufacturing. Therefore the Wirral was a strategic location that offered good access to the Mersey's port facilities. Crucially it was also outside the the Port of Liverpool's jurisdiction and exempt from their fees.

As well as being a brilliant businessman, Lever was a philanthropist. He wanted his employees to have a decent place to live and opportunities to better themselves. He commissioned a village for his workers with fine houses complemented by social facilities and open spaces. The layout of a workers' village in this grand style was revolutionary but the social aspects were even more far-sighted. In fact, they were unmatched at the time and for many years after.

This walk explores Lever's village, Port Sunlight. The walk was created by Martin Haslett, a town planner. **Martin:** "Although I have worked in various places in England, I have never had the chance to plan anywhere quite as pioneering as Port Sunlight! I do hope you will enjoy exploring this very special village."

Directions 1

Remain outside Lever House.

2. A new enterprise

Lever House, Wood Street

The central character in the story of Port Sunlight is William Hesketh Lever. He was born in Bolton, Lancashire in 1851 - a time when the Northwest was a very important industrial and trading region. Lever soon joined the family grocery business. With his brother James, he specialised in producing soap.

Lever Brothers soap was different to others of the time: it used vegetable oils rather than animal fats so it lathered more easily. It was also sold in a new way. Shopkeepers usually kept large blocks of soap and cut pieces off for customers. Lever, however, decided to pre-package individual bars. Each bar was neatly packaged and stamped with the name 'Sunlight Soap'.

Lever was quick to see the possibilities of advertising and brand loyalty to promote his product. He originally leased a factory in Warrington which soon produced 450 tons of soap a week. In just a few years the enterprise had outgrown this factory and so Lever found a new site for the business here on the Wirral.



William Hesketh Lever, founder of Port Sunlight
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



The Lever Brothers factory at Port Sunlight (1934)
Courtesy of www.britainfromabove.org.uk © English Heritage

There were plenty of geographical reasons to build a factory here – the site had good access to the sea and docks for importing the vegetable oils; it adjoined the railway line to Birkenhead; and it was close to the Northwest's well-established chemical industry. As we have already discovered, by siting his factory on the Wirral Lever also avoided the port dues payable in Liverpool just across the water.

In other respects, the site was not so promising. The land was very flat and marshy with tidal creeks cutting across it. We will discover the impact of this later.



Left: A colourful Sunlight Soap advertisement (1920s). Right: Workers going into Lever House (c.1910)
Courtesy of Grace's Guide - www.GracesGuide.co.uk / The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

This ornate stone frontage is Lever House, the office entrance to Lever's new factory. It was built in 1895, eight years after construction of the factory began. The rest of the factory is the long redbrick building beside the road. Lever was passionate about architecture, as we shall see throughout this walk. This grand entrance made a clear statement that this was more than just another factory.

By the 1920s there were fewer opportunities for expansion in the cleaning materials market so Lever Brothers began to diversify. They started to co operate with the Dutch company Margarine Unie and in 1930 the two companies merged to form Unilever. It was one of the first truly multinational companies and is known today for many household and food products.

Their company literature says: "With 400 brands spanning 14 categories of home, personal care and foods products, no other company touches so many people's lives in so many different ways".

Although Sunlight Soap is no longer a brand in the UK, Lever's legacy remains - not only in one of the world's biggest companies but in this remarkable village.

Directions 2

With your back to Lever House cross over the road and bear left. Stop outside the Gladstone Theatre on the corner of Greendale Road.

3. The Prime Minister visits

Gladstone Theatre, Greendale Road

Although the entrance to the factory that we have just looked at was spectacular, it was the village at Port Sunlight that was to be the architectural gem.

Lever was not the first industrialist to build houses for his workers. Saltaire near Bradford and New Lanark near Glasgow were both good early examples. These developments attempted to create better living conditions for workers and their families. They were known as 'model villages', with 'model' meaning exemplary rather than miniature.



Gladstone Theatre
© Martin Haslett

The houses in these model villages were certainly better than the crowded slums of Victorian cities. What distinguishes Port Sunlight from other workers' settlements though is Lever's determination to plan a village which would be as attractive as possible. He wanted his workers to live in homes that equalled the beauty of wealthier areas. Lever said: "there can be no reason why man should not make towns liveable and healthy..just as much subject to the beneficial influence of bright sunshine, fresh air, flowers, and plants as the country".



Left: an insanitary slum that stood on the site before Port Sunlight was built (1880s)

Right: an example of the high-quality housing constructed in the village (c.1910)

Courtesy of The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

Before Port Sunlight was built most workers' villages were laid out as a traditional grid of streets. These did not give much opportunity to include open spaces or make the most of natural features, such as the lie of the land and existing trees.

Lever's village was not only to be beautiful to the eye. It was also to be a self-contained community with shops, schools, a cottage hospital, a church, a social club and recreational facilities.

This is Port Sunlight's first public building. It was originally the Gladstone Hall and served as the dining room for male employees. The name derives from its opening in 1891 by Liberal Prime Minister, William Gladstone. Lever had been born into a family of Liberal politics, religious non-conformity and alcoholic abstinence - a background he shared with many philanthropists of the late-Victorian era. The building is now the Gladstone Theatre.



An architectural gem - examples of housing in Port Sunlight
© Rory Walsh / Martin Haslett

Directions 3

Continue along Greendale Road for about 30 metres. Stop beside the stone fountain and look across the road at the black and white timber-framed bank and office building. Feel free to cross the road for a closer look.

4. No men allowed!

Former Girls' Hostel, Greendale Road

At the last stop we saw the former dining room for Lever's male employees. In the Victorian era of high morals and respectable behaviour, gender segregation was very important. It was standard practice for single working girls to live in hostels - and this is the one built in Port Sunlight.

In big cities women's hostels were often unpleasant places. What a contrast Port Sunlight's hostel was to be: an architect-designed building modelled on Tudor houses. No trouble or expense was spared in its construction.



The Girls' Hostel when a library and museum (c.1910)
Courtesy of The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

Notice the plaster mouldings above the ground floor windows showing figures and leaves. This feature - known as 'pargetting' - copies something often found on traditional timber-framed buildings.



Pargetting above the ground floor
© Martin Haslett

Also note that it looks rather like a row of individual houses. It was designed to be socially inclusive - the girls who lived here were not intended to feel inferior to other residents of the village. Despite this ambition, however, the hostel was not a success as young women disliked the convent-like atmosphere where no men were allowed inside.

Undaunted, Lever turned the building into a free library and museum. This became popular with factory workers taking lunch breaks to read books and newspapers. Nearby was the Lever Club, a village social club.

Directions 4

Continue along the left hand side of Greendale Road. Pass Port Sunlight railway station and stop by the wooden bus shelter as the road curves to the left. Look down the road at the houses on the other side.

5. Making an impression

Houses opposite Port Sunlight station, Greendale Road

Do you notice anything surprising about this street? The houses of Greendale Road face the railway. If you travel by train you will see that it is usually the rear of houses that back onto a railway line. But the opposite happened here.

This area of Port Sunlight was one of the earliest parts of the village to be constructed. Lever wanted people to see his new village from the railway, with these houses acting as an advert for a better way of living.



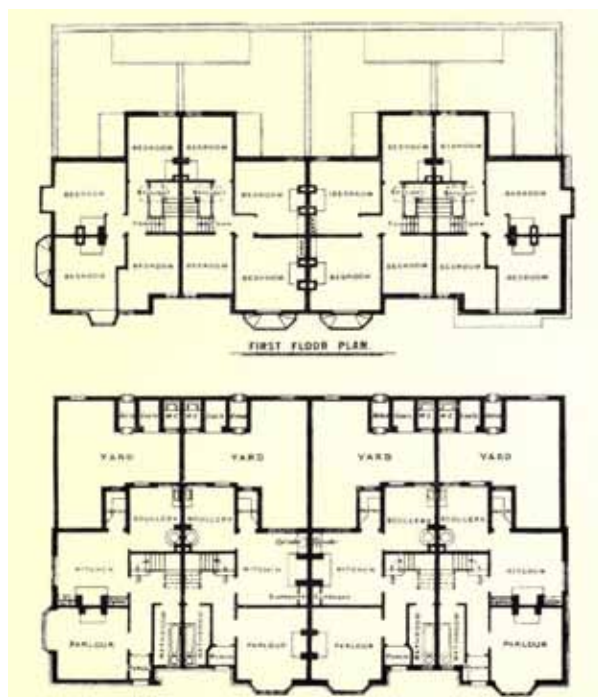
Some of Port Sunlight's first houses, Greendale Road
© Rory Walsh

Even so, the road is wide and the front gardens are generous so the impact of trains passing along the line would not have been too great on residents.

Each house has a front and rear garden and each block is of an individual design – you won't find them repeated.

Internally, though, they were more uniform. A 'Kitchen Cottage' had a kitchen, scullery and three bedrooms above, while a 'Parlour Cottage' also had a living room and a fourth bedroom. All of them had an indoor bathroom, which was an exceptional luxury at a time when most houses of the working classes had outside privies.

Houses were allocated according to the size of a worker's family rather than their status at the factory. At the next stop we will see another innovative design.



'Parlour Cottage' plans complete with bathrooms
Courtesy of The Victorian Web
www.victorianweb.org

Directions 5

Retrace your steps and cross Greendale Road at the traffic island outside the station. At the tea room turn right and use the second traffic island. Keep the park on your left and follow the road up to a stone footbridge. Stop halfway over the bridge.

6. Walking on water

Dell Bridge, Park Road

As mentioned earlier, this area of the Wirral was once very marshy. Streams, or creeks, crossed the site on their way into the Mersey estuary, often shifting with the tides. To develop the village these creeks were filled-in with soil.

Well-planned settlements make the most of the natural lie of the land rather than impose a grid on top. If you look at the route maps you will see what effect the creeks had on Port Sunlight's layout: one of the site's hallmarks is the number of curving streets.



Dell Bridge
© Martin Haslett

We can still see the remains of a creek from this bridge overlooking The Dell, a small wooded valley. The Dell was a former creek. Notice the curved road that we followed beside it. The shape and depression of The Dell is also a significant part of the design. Informal open spaces like this gave the houses a good setting and provided opportunities for tree planting. The Dell is a good example and clearly no expense was spared - this ornate bridge is physically unnecessary and purely decorative.



The Dell was created from a filled in sea creek
© Martin Haslett

Directions 6

Continue across the bridge. Carefully cross the road and stop facing the cottage on the corner. **To avoid the steps** - continue along Park Road, following the path around The Dell.

7. Building a community

Bridge Cottage, 23 Park Road

As a wealthy man Lever owned many homes, including one in the nearby village of Thornton Hough. He rented Thornton Manor in 1888 so that he could oversee construction of Port Sunlight.

He later bought the Manor and the rest of the village for himself and other members of his family. Lever then remodelled the whole of Thornton Hough village using leading architects.

While some of the work was being carried out at Thornton Hough, Lever lived here at Bridge Cottage. Look out for a blue plaque on the wall recording Lever's residence.



Bridge Cottage
© Rory Walsh

It is quite a modest cottage for so rich a man. It also shows that Lever did not lead a separate life from his workers. In fact he took a full part in Port Sunlight's social activities, just as all the residents were required to do. For example, at social dances he always asked to be paired with any girl who had been left without a dance partner!



Bridge Cottage plaque
© Rory Walsh

Workers were invited to Thornton Manor for Christmas celebrations and every child in Port Sunlight received a book as a present on their birthday. Needless to say this was always a serious work of children's literature, often delivered by Lady Lever herself.

All these efforts meant that Port Sunlight was so much more than just a group of nice houses - it was a community.

Directions 7

With Bridge Cottage behind you look across the road at the red brick building with a clock tower adjoining the bridge and the bowling green.

8. Bowled over

The Lyceum and bowling green, Bridge Street

The building with the clock tower is one of the village's social facilities - the Lyceum. The word lyceum comes from Greek and means 'a place devoted to teaching'. There are institutions of this name in many British towns and cities. Most were established to provide popular education through discussions, lectures and concerts.

This Lyceum was built as a school and social centre. It was also used for religious services on Sundays. Again, the size and quality of the building shows that no expense has been spared. Look at the stone used for the plinth and around the windows; also note the intricate window design, the complicated roof pattern and the chimneys. These are all indicators of a high-quality expensive building.



The Lyceum
© Martin Haslett

Beyond the Lyceum is the village bowling green, another purpose-built open space. But look out for a group of trees opposite the green - they were not in the original village plan.



The Employees' Provident Stores (c.1915)
Courtesy of The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

The trees occupy the site of The Employees' Provident Stores, a shop where Lever's staff were encouraged to buy their provisions. Often factory owners used such shops to make even more money out of their workers. In this case however the building housed three co-operative stores which were run by the residents.

During the Second World War many large factories were used to produce armaments and military machinery so they became bombing targets. The Stores were destroyed during an air raid and never replaced.

Directions 8

Cross the road towards the Lyceum and continue along Bridge Street. Pass the bowling green on your right and notice the site of the former shop on your left. At the end turn right into Bolton Road. Stop opposite the second building on the other side, Hulme Hall.

9. An ostentatious building?

Hulme Hall, 23 Bolton Road

At the beginning of the walk we saw Gladstone Hall, the original male dining room for the village. This is Hulme Hall, originally the women's dining room. Hulme was Lever's wife Elizabeth's maiden name.

Hulme Hall reflects what we have already seen throughout the village – an individually-designed building in the 'Arts and Crafts' style. The Arts and Crafts Movement began from the 1860s, led by artist and designer William Morris. The movement displayed the skills of craftsmen as well as the beauty of design.



Female workers dining in Hulme Hall (c.1910)
Courtesy of The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

Buildings in the Arts and Crafts style use natural forms, usually with local materials and their construction involved local craftsmen. We saw a good example earlier with the pargetting on the girls' hostel. Hulme Hall has stone and brick detailing, this time with carved barge boards on the roof gables. We shall see many more Arts and Crafts features as we continue.



Carved barge boards on the gables
© Rory Walsh

Though Port Sunlight's buildings were meant to be distinctive rather than plain, inside Hulme Hall are some high-quality features which Lever considered excessive. Like many Victorian philanthropists he lived a comparatively simple lifestyle despite his immense wealth and believed that money should be spent wisely.

Before moving on, see if you can spot another plaque. In 1962 Hulme Hall was where Ringo Starr played for the first time with The Beatles.

Directions 9

With the Hall on your left continue along Bolton Road for about 200 metres then stop when you reach the Bridge Inn.

10. A pub with no beer

The Bridge Inn, Bolton Road

The Bridge Inn is named after a bridge on Bolton Road which crossed another of the area's tidal creeks. Look again at the map and you will see that this creek has also been filled. There is practically nothing left of the bridge either, although a small portion of it is preserved as a seat opposite the pub.

The building was designed in the tradition of the great English inns with a dining room and bedrooms for visitors. The interior matched the quality of the exterior but, as with so many Victorian pubs, some of the original fittings have since been removed.



The Bridge Inn
© Rory Walsh

Despite these changes the Bridge Inn retains much of its original character. But this was always an inn with a difference – when it first opened it did not serve alcohol! Some social reformers believed that alcohol was the root of urban poverty. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the Temperance Movement urged abstinence from alcohol. When Port Sunlight was built the movement was very strong. The Bridge Inn was a Temperance pub.



The seat opposite the Bridge Inn
© Rory Walsh

Although Lever disapproved of alcohol, not all his workers felt the same way. A couple of years after the inn opened a deputation of villagers asked Lever to sell alcohol on the premises. Lever organised a vote in the village, which approved the idea.

Despite his own reservations Lever allowed the change to go ahead. However the Bridge Inn also had to serve tea, coffee and excellent soup (at just tuppence a bowl). In this way working men were encouraged to enjoy sustenance other than beer.

Directions 10

Retrace your steps past the Bridge Inn car park then turn right into Church Drive. Continue until you reach the church. Go through the gate porch and stop in the church grounds.

11. A personal gift

Christ Church, Church Drive

Most of the building work in Port Sunlight was funded by the profits of Lever's soap business. This church, however, is one of two buildings that Lever paid for personally.

Like many of the Victorian era's greatest philanthropists, Lever was a religious man who worshipped in the Non-Conformist tradition. Non-Conformism is independent of the Anglican Church and had a particularly strong following in the industrial towns and cities of England and Wales.



Christ Church
© Martin Haslett

Today Christ Church is a United Reformed Church. However, Lever established it as non-denominational to include people of all backgrounds. Lever's wish was that this would be "a church in whose worship all Christian people, except those of extreme views, could share".

It was also Lever's chance to express his architectural beliefs. Lever had a life-long passion for architecture. Christ Church was built in English Gothic style using local Cheshire sandstone and oak furnishing. The architects, William and Segar Owen, had previously designed many of the village houses. Today this is the only United Reformed Church in the country with eight bells, originally donated by Lever.



Lord and Lady Leverhulme's tomb, Christ Church
© David Dixon, Geograph (CCL)

Christ Church is the final resting place of both Lever and his wife. They are buried in an ornate marble tomb complete with life-sized bronze statues. Their tomb, the low-roofed part of the church to the left when viewed from the road, is generally considered to be a triumph of early twentieth century design.

If the church is open do have a look inside and also take the opportunity visit the Levers' tomb.

Directions 11

Continue along Church Drive and stop outside Church Drive School.

12. An educated workforce

Church Drive School

Port Sunlight's school is yet another triumph of architectural design with no expense spared. Just look at the clock tower and building detail. The school also demonstrates that education was very important to Lever.



Church Drive School
© Martin Haslett

In Victorian times it was common for children to work long hours from a very young age. Although laws were passed that required children to receive some basic education, these were rarely enforced.

Lever believed that it was only by self-help, particularly through education, that working people would better themselves. At Port Sunlight children could only work from the age of 13. That sounds very young today but in late-Victorian times education was compulsory only until the age of ten.



School children at a 'drill class' (c.1910)
Courtesy of The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

Living in Port Sunlight provided a significant helping hand to a small number of people but Lever saw education as the key to wider progress. Therefore he provided young people with educational opportunities after they had left school as well.

Young employees were required to study in evening classes. The subjects provided were English, accountancy, science and engineering – all paid for by the company. These classes were held here and at Hesketh Hall, which we will see later.

Directions 12

Cross the road opposite the school and retrace your steps along Church Drive. Opposite Christ Church turn right into The Causeway. Continue towards the war memorial. Stop by the flag pole.

13. A studied change of plan

Port Sunlight War Memorial and The Causeway

We are now beside Port Sunlight War Memorial. It was completed in 1921 to record men from the village who had died in the First World War. It was designed by Lever's friend William Goscombe John and is rather unusual for including statues of women and children.

This road is called The Causeway and is another example of the natural shape of the landscape influencing the street pattern: it is another filled in creek.

The street plan also shows an important change here. Turn right and, with the war memorial behind you, look towards the building at the end of the view.



Aerial view of the later village's axial plan (1934)
Courtesy of www.britainfromabove.org.uk © English Heritage

This is the Lady Lever Art Gallery which we will see in more detail shortly. For now notice that the street layout is completely different. Instead of informal groups of cottages in the style of an English village, there is a different form of town planning relying on grand views and vistas.

The change of approach resulted from a competition. Lever asked the students of Liverpool University's Architecture and Civic Design departments for a plan to complete the village. The winning entry had grand vistas looking towards a focal point, a style often referred to as 'axial design'. This change appealed to Lever - so much so that he increased the axial elements even further and this form of design dominates the later sections of the village.

Lever already had a close connection with the newly-established Liverpool University. In 1907 he won a libel action against The Daily Mail and decided to use some of the proceeds to develop several academic departments. His money helped to found the Department of Civic Design, the world's first university department devoted to the study of town and country planning.

Directions 13

Continue through the gardens towards the gallery. Pass the fountain and car park then bear left towards the island with a column and group of statues. Carefully cross the road to the island and face the statues and gallery.

14. A visual memorial

Leverhulme Memorial and Lady Lever Art Gallery

Lever used some of his wealth to collect art but he put his acquisitions to good use. For example, some of his pictures appeared in his firm's adverts. Neither did Lever keep these pictures entirely to himself – they were often displayed in the dining rooms for workers to admire, all part of the plan to encourage working people to better themselves.

Opened in 1922, the Lady Lever Art Gallery was one of the last buildings completed in the village. Lever named it after his then late wife Elizabeth. It is much more than a little local collection – it's an art gallery of national importance. Do take the opportunity to look inside – it's free and well worth a visit.



Lady Lever Art Gallery
© Martin Haslett



'Inspiration' statue, Leverhulme Memorial
© Rory Walsh

Beside the gallery is the Leverhulme Memorial, completed after Lever's death in 1925. It features five statues that reflect major influences on his life and work. The four figures at the base depict Industry, Education, Charity and Art, while the figure on top of the column depicts Inspiration. The name comes from Lever's peerage title Lord Leverhulme (the second part honouring his wife by taking her maiden name).

With the memorial behind you, look down the short road called Windy Bank. This is another example of the village's later axial plan. The layout was created to emphasise the memorial and make it visible from the railway line. To achieve this it was necessary to demolish some existing cottages.

It could be argued the memorial is unnecessary when the whole village is such a splendid commemoration of this visionary man!

Directions 14

Carefully cross the roads to the Lady Lever gallery entrance. Turn left and continue around the back of the gallery. Stop at the junction with a small roundabout and look at the group of trees across the road.

15. Save the trees

Tree plantation opposite 29-33 Lower Road

This is a good place to appreciate the enormous amount of tree planting in Port Sunlight and the importance of open space in giving the village its character. Without its splendid landscaping Port Sunlight would be a very different place.

On the other side of the roundabout, the open space with the clump of trees is situated on another former tidal creek. The site is now almost imperceptibly lower than the surrounding land.

Now look to the left of the roundabout to the white and red houses set back from the road. These houses were laid out like this to protect a beech tree which stood on the grass at the front.

When the village was first laid out there would have been comparatively few mature trees on this marshy land. So protecting existing trees was important. The tree has since died but the layout shows how much care was taken to protect existing landscape features.



Top: an example of the tree planting around Port Sunlight
Above: houses set back from the road to protect a tree
© Martin Haslett

In the 1970s and 80s Dutch elm disease killed nearly a thousand trees in the village. Enormous efforts have been taken to replace these them, initially with different species. It was not until the early years of the twenty-first century that elms could be planted in the village again. This illustrates how landscape planting has to be carefully managed to retain Port Sunlight's setting.

Directions 15

Pass the roundabout then cross the road towards the group of trees. Continue up to the junction and stop opposite the entrance of the building on the corner, now the Port Sunlight Museum.

16. Attracting visitors

Port Sunlight Museum, 23 King George's Drive

This grand building was originally the Girls' Club but is now the Port Sunlight Museum which moved here in 2006. The Museum is well worth a visit for its fascinating exhibitions, well-stocked gift shop and cosy tea room. You can find out more about William Lever, the village buildings and what life and work in Port Sunlight was like through the decades.

Besides explaining the village's history the Museum attracts thousands of visitors. Like much of the village today, it is owned and run by the Port Sunlight Village Trust. We will find out more about the Trust later in the walk.

Visitors were encouraged to visit Port Sunlight however long before the Museum opened. The first village souvenir brochure was produced in 1891 - just three years after building work began. New editions were produced regularly and in 1909 the village welcomed 54,000 people.



Port Sunlight Museum
© Martin Haslett



'Spend a day at Port Sunlight' LMS railway poster (1930s)
© National Railway Museum /
Science & Society Picture Library

Many came to inspect progress with the new village's social facilities. They included several Prime Ministers as well as kings and queens. Industrialists, town planners, architects and labour organisation representatives also came to the village. Trade unionists were interested too since Lever's work practices embraced much of what the trade unions and the newly-formed Labour Party were fighting for.

Lever himself gave lectures about the village and Port Sunlight often featured in his company's advertising. Through all these ways Port Sunlight soon became a well-known place.

Directions 16

With the Museum on your right go along Windy Bank towards the school. At the end turn left into Church Drive. After a short distance turn right between the modern stone piers to go into Lodge Lane. Stop by the entrance of the large grey building on the right.

17. Beneficial treatment

Leverhulme Hotel and Spa, Lodge Lane

This building was once a hospital. It was completed in 1907 and was another important public facility for the village. It was funded and staffed by the company and featured open-air wards, reflecting Lever's belief in the health benefits of fresh air. It later became a care home and is now a four-star hotel.



Leverhulme Hotel and Spa
© Martin Haslett

The village's excellent housing, good working conditions in the factory and the medical facilities soon showed very considerable benefits.

By 1909 the death rate in Port Sunlight was way below the national average and the infant mortality rate here was half what it was across the river in Liverpool. At a time when many children died in infancy, often from treatable minor illnesses and the results of insanitary conditions, this was proof that Lever's social experiment was producing the results he had hoped for.



A sign of the former hospital
© Martin Haslett

This social experiment only benefitted selected people though. Not everybody was welcome in the village: the houses were only available to workers at the factory and then only to those who obeyed the social customs that Lever approved of.

Habits that Lever considered 'objectionable' included slothfulness, drinking, gambling, or simply failing to take a full part in the village's extra-curricular activities. If you lost your job at the factory, you also lost your family home.

In later years there were rumblings of discontent among employees who found the company's attitude too paternalistic. That would probably be the view we would take today.

Directions 17

Continue along Lodge Lane and follow the pavement through a gap in the hedge. Cross the road (Pool Bank), turn right and immediately left into the continuation of Lodge Lane. At the end of Lodge Lane turn left then continue up to the bus stop.

18. Different standards

New Chester Road past the junction of Lodge Lane

This is the very edge of the village. From here we can see the contrast between Port Sunlight and the more recent building development on the other side of the road.

Although the exclusive nature of Port Sunlight is diluted here compared to the heart of the village, we can still see high-quality houses all built in individual styles. Most have front gardens and there is considerable landscaping with trees and hedges.



Contrasting housing on New Chester Road
© Martin Haslett

Compare this to the other side of the road where the buildings directly adjoin the pavement and are unremarkable in architectural style. There's also a complete lack of unified design.



Traffic and commercial buildings on New Chester Road
© Martin Haslett

Also note the building uses. There is a mixture of housing and commercial functions, including shops, offices and vehicle sales. Mixed uses like these usually result in residents losing amenities.

In Port Sunlight we have seen how the various uses are kept separate. For example, the factory occupies the southern part of the site and so there are no industrial sites in the residential areas.

As you walk along this busy main road you will also appreciate how quiet the streets of Port Sunlight were.

Directions 18

Continue along New Chester Road. Stop at the first junction on the left, the corner of Boundary Road. Look at the large building opposite.

19. Hall of learning

Hesketh Hall, corner of Boundary Road and New Chester Road

After the church, this is the grandest building in Port Sunlight. Hesketh Hall was the Technical Institute. It occupies a prominent corner site and its architectural styling and close attention to detail add to the sense of grandeur.

Have a look a little further along New Chester Road and you will see that Hesketh Hall consists of two separate but linked buildings which offer plenty of space for the important matter of education.



The Technical Institute (c.1915)
Courtesy of The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

Like the church, Lever paid for Hesketh Hall personally. The building represented his great belief in the importance of education: workers needed to educate themselves to achieve advancement.

This was not nearly as easy as it would be today. Lever workers had a long day in the factory and only one full day off each week (Sundays). Nevertheless, many wanted to improve their education and the Technical Institute gave them this opportunity.

After its use as the Institute this building served as the British Legion for many years. In Spring 2014 it was converted into 14 apartments. The Port Sunlight Village Trust carefully restored the building as far as is possible back to its original appearance and many architectural features have been brought back to life.

Directions 19

Turn left into Boundary Road and take the first left into Circular Drive. Almost immediately turn left into a small road that gives access to the rear of the houses.

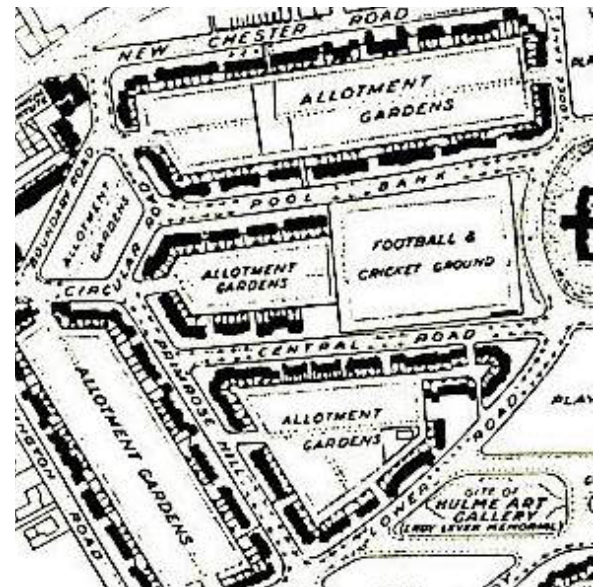
20. Growing space

Rear of New Chester Road / Circular Drive / Pool Bank

This is an opportunity to see behind of some of Port Sunlight's houses. Note that the house backs are comparatively plain – all the effort went into the front.

The other thing to notice is the space. Originally the space behind house blocks was given over to garden allotments. These were a way for working people to feed their families. Many Victorians believed that gardening would also have a positive effect on morale and self-respect - and keep people out of the pubs. These ideas certainly reflected everything that Lever believed in.

There still are some allotments in use although much of the land is now used for parking. From here we can see some well-landscaped gardens and some newer blocks of garages.



Detail from the 1914 village map showing allotments behind each row of houses
Courtesy of The Victorian Web



Residents working on an allotment lined with cabbages (c.1910)
Courtesy of The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

Despite these recent changes, the spaciousness of the original design has been retained. Port Sunlight was developed as a very low-density village with plenty of space for recreation and self-betterment.

Such living at low densities is now a luxury we can no longer afford in our growing cities. It uses too much land and makes providing public transport more difficult.

Directions 20

Return to Circular Drive, turn left and take second left into Primrose Hill. Note the great variety of house styles here. Pass the back of the Lady Lever gallery on the left and continue to the end of Primrose Hill which is lined with trees. At the very end of the road, take the footpath to the right. Stop by the Duke Of York Cottages sign on the houses set back from the road.

21. Care for the elderly

Duke of York Cottages, corner of Bebington Road and Greendale Road

As we have already discovered, the allocation of houses in Port Sunlight was based on the size of a worker's family rather than their status in the company. It is strange to think that one of the era's most successful capitalists adopted the same method of housing allocation as the Soviet Union did many years later!

All of the Port Sunlight houses were for rent, which was deducted directly from wages. The Kitchen Cottages were 5 or 6 shillings a week while the Parlour Cottages were 7 to 10 shillings a week.



Duke of York Cottages
© Martin Haslett

This was quite affordable for a man earning between 20 and 25 shillings a week but less so for the company which had to pay the rates and made a loss.



Duke of York Cottages plaque
© Martin Haslett

Lever Brothers was also one of the first companies to offer its workers a pension scheme, something unheard of in the Victorian era. These buildings are the Duke of York Cottages, which were designed as pensioners' houses and added to over a period of time.

Including accommodation especially for pensioners was important as it enabled older people to be moved out of larger houses, making more space for younger families.

Directions 21

With the cottages behind you take the footpath to the main road (Greendale Road). Turn left and continue along Greendale Road. Pass the Leverhulme Memorial on the left then stop outside the large black and white timber-framed building on the left.

22. A classy copy

Kenyon Peel Cottages, Greendale Road

This spectacular building is Kenyon Peel Cottages. Built in 1902, it is a close but not exact copy of Kenyon Peel Hall in Salford which is not so far from Lever's birthplace in Bolton. Lever may well have known the original building.

This form of architectural copying has a grand history dating back to the seventeenth century when wealthy travellers first started to visit ancient Greek temples. On their return to Britain it became popular to build classical structures and follies in the parks and gardens of their stately homes.



Engraving of Kenyon Peel Cottages (c.1915)
Courtesy of The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

The architect here was perhaps making a statement that working people can live in grand halls too, even if the front elevation needed more doors! Once again it's a high-quality building, very well-designed by leading architects and built by craftsmen. The original hall in Salford was demolished in the mid-twentieth century and replaced by a housing estate so now only this reproduction remains.



Kenyon Peel Cottages today
© Martin Haslett

Directions 22

Continue along Greendale Road. Take the second left into The Causeway so that a car park is on your right. Stop on the pavement by the car park at the sign for Port Sunlight Garden Centre.

23. No swimming

Port Sunlight Garden Centre, The Causeway

Along the walk you should have noticed how the village plan is clearly separated between commercial and residential areas. This is known to planners as 'zoning'. It is important because non-residential uses often cause people disturbance, especially today when they invariably mean traffic and often heavy goods vehicles making deliveries.

The only non-residential buildings in Port Sunlight are local shops and public buildings. Even the pub is carefully located without any immediate residential neighbours, although it seems doubtful that anyone in Lever's village would have dared to be rowdy!



Port Sunlight Garden Centre sign
© Rory Walsh

So the location of Port Sunlight Garden Centre might seem unusual. The site was originally a gymnasium and open air swimming pool, with warm water supplied from the soap factory. As mentioned at the former hospital, Lever was a devotee of fresh air. He regarded physical recreation opportunities for his workers to be as important as educational advancement.



Port Sunlight open air swimming pool (c.1910)
Courtesy of The Victorian Web - www.victorianweb.org

The pool was a well-designed and decorative place. Even the dressing huts were thatched. It remained in use until 1971 and the buildings were demolished in 1975. To this day, aerial photos show the circular outline of the pool in the tarmac of the garden centre car park.

Though the pool is gone, this site is still a community hub in the village. The garden centre attracts large numbers of locals and visitors who enjoy its facilities and tranquil setting.

Directions 23

With the car park on your right follow the railings and turn right into Queen Mary's Drive. Carefully cross the road and continue up to a stone arch on the left. Stop just past the arch and look at the houses ahead.

24. A housing bubble

Southeast end of Jubilee Crescent

When Lever died in 1925 about 890 homes in the village had been completed. Development continued after his death, including the buildings here. This is Jubilee Crescent, one of the last streets laid out in Port Sunlight. When it was completed in 1938 the village commemorated its fiftieth anniversary.

As we heard earlier the Second World War brought some damage. Besides the shop several houses were destroyed by enemy bombing. Most were carefully rebuilt so that the plan of Port Sunlight remained little changed.



Jubilee Crescent housing
© Martin Haslett

You may be wondering how Port Sunlight remains so well looked after. For many years Unilever Merseyside continued to take good care of the village. Houses were sensitively modernised and renovated. Some roads were closed to prevent through traffic and the landscaping was rejuvenated. In 1978 the whole of Port Sunlight became a Conservation Area, with 900 Grade II listed buildings.

Then in 1999 Unilever gave the entire village to Port Sunlight Village Trust, an independent charity formed to conserve and promote the village. The Trust manages Port Sunlight Museum, some 250 houses, 8 public buildings, every blade of grass, and all the monuments and memorials.

The Trust spends £2 million each year maintaining the landscape and built heritage of Port Sunlight, as well as delivering lifelong learning programmes. It is reliant on income from property rentals, museum admissions, shop and tea room sales, and grants and sponsorship to fulfil its mission. Every penny is reinvested back into the village.

Besides being a pleasant place to visit, Port Sunlight is also a desirable place to live and this is reflected in local property prices.

Directions 24

Follow Jubilee Crescent as it curves to the left. Pass the stone balustrade and turn left up the shallow group of steps. To avoid the steps cross the grass. Stop by the circular mosaic in the ground showing a ship.

25. Lever's legacy

Port Sunlight Village time capsule mosaic

We end the walk at a peaceful spot in the heart of Port Sunlight. This mosaic was completed in 2008 and covers the village time capsule. From here we can see many of the landmarks that feature in Port Sunlight's careful design.

Port Sunlight built on earlier attempts to create better living conditions for workers and their families, such as Saltaire near Bradford and New Lanark near Glasgow. But William Lever went several steps further by creating a deliberately-planned village that was beautiful, with houses that equalled those of the wealthier classes, landscaping and open spaces, and social and welfare facilities.



The time capsule mosaic
© Martin Haslett

These reflected Lever's belief in the importance of creating a community, where working people could live decent lives and have the opportunity to better themselves.



Detail from the cover of Ebenezer Howard's
'Garden Cities of To-morrow' (1902)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Lever's village was very closely followed by Bournville in Birmingham which was developed by the Cadbury chocolate family. These two settlements had an enormous influence on subsequent town planning and residential development, both in Britain and abroad.

Besides design they also influenced planning theory. In 1898 Ebenezer Howard published the book 'To-morrow: a peaceful path to real reform' which described his concept of 'garden cities'. These well-planned settlements could enable people to enjoy the fruits of town and country life, with social aspects being just as important as the physical layout.

The design of the houses in Port Sunlight - with their Arts and Crafts details, generous gardens and leafy setting - inspired millions of inter-war semi-detached houses in British suburbs. But these often lacked the community and social facilities that Port Sunlight pioneered.

It was not until after the Second World War that Britain's New Towns embodied the aims of Lever and Howard, combining decent houses, gardens and good layout with social facilities to create a balanced community.

Lever has been criticised for some of his work, particularly abroad, and not all his business ventures were successful, but it is hard to fault what he created at Port Sunlight.

Martin: "I do hope you have enjoyed this walk. As I said earlier, I am a town planner, so you can see why I am enthusiastic about this village. But there is another reason for my interest. I studied Town Planning at Liverpool University in the department that Lever set up, so this is also my personal thank you to the great man!"



Cottages on Central Road
© Rory Walsh

Directions 25

You may now like to explore the village further, perhaps visit the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight Museum or the Garden Centre.

To return to Lever House or Port Sunlight railway station head towards the War Memorial and turn left into The Causeway. Continue to the end then turn left onto Greendale Road. At the end of Greendale Road the station is on the right hand side. Lever House is past the station at the junction with Wood Street.

Alternatively there are two optional walk extensions you may like to try to compare Port Sunlight with other local types of planned development. See the directions on the next two pages.

Walk extension to Bromborough Pool

Bromborough Pool is another example of a planned development for factory workers. It is located about 1 mile southeast of Port Sunlight.

Directions (from Stop 18 of the Port Sunlight walk route)

Continue in the opposite direction along New Chester Road so the edge of Port Sunlight is on the right. Cross Bolton Road at the large roundabout and continue past the golf course.

The road becomes a dual carriageway over a bridge. Take care here of fast moving traffic. Use the pedestrian crossings outside the car showroom to cross over the road then turn left into Pool Lane. Where the main road bends to the right take the left fork lined with trees. Take care as there is no pavement on the right hand side. Take the first right and continue towards the red brick houses. This road is South View.

To reach the centre of Bromborough Pool turn left and pass the small recreation ground.

The small planned village of Bromborough Pool consists of Manor Place, York Street, South View and The Green. It was developed from 1854 to provide homes for workers in the nearby Price's Candle Factory and is a good example of an earlier type of factory settlement.

The houses are smaller than those at Port Sunlight and do not have the pleasant setting and landscaping as they are laid out on a grid plan.

Unusually for workers' housing of that time, each house had running water and was connected to a drainage system with internal water closets. The village had other very progressive features including a school and village hall and workers could subscribe to a pension fund.

The bridge on the way to Bromborough Pool crosses a remaining sea creek and the village is located right next to the original harbour that Lever Brothers used for importing raw materials to the soap factory at Port Sunlight.



Bromborough Pool housing and village hall
© Martin Haslett

Walk extension to Trafalgar Drive

The Trafalgar Drive area is another example of a planned development for factory workers. It is located a short walk to the west of Port Sunlight.

Directions (from Port Sunlight railway station)

From the station turn left onto Greendale Road. Cross over Ellen's Lane then turn left to go under the railway bridge. Take the first left into Gardens Road then at the end turn left at the petrol station. Pass the Brown Cow pub then cross over the road to go into Trafalgar Drive.



Trafalgar Drive housing
© Martin Haslett

On the other side of Port Sunlight, across the railway line a little to the west, in the Trafalgar Drive area we can see the sort of housing that was being built for sale in the early part of the twentieth century. The rents of these properties would have been beyond the pocket of most of the Port Sunlight employees.

It was intended for rather better-off people and is still very pleasant today. However notice the grid layout, with few trees or other forms of landscaping. It makes quite a contrast to Port Sunlight.

Further information

Christ Church, Port Sunlight

<https://christchurchportsunlight.wordpress.com>

Gladstone Theatre

www.gladstonetheatre.org.uk

Hulme Hall

www.hulmehall.com

Lady Lever Art Gallery

www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ladylever

Port Sunlight Community Online

www.portsunlight.org.uk

Port Sunlight Garden Centre

www.portsunlightgardens.co.uk

Port Sunlight Museum and Garden Village

www.portsunlightvillage.com

Tudor Rose Tea Room

www.tudorrosetearooms.co.uk

The Victorian Web – Port Sunlight

<http://victorianweb.org/art/architecture/portsunlight/1.html>

Other model villages:

Saltaire Village (West Yorkshire)

www.saltairevillage.info

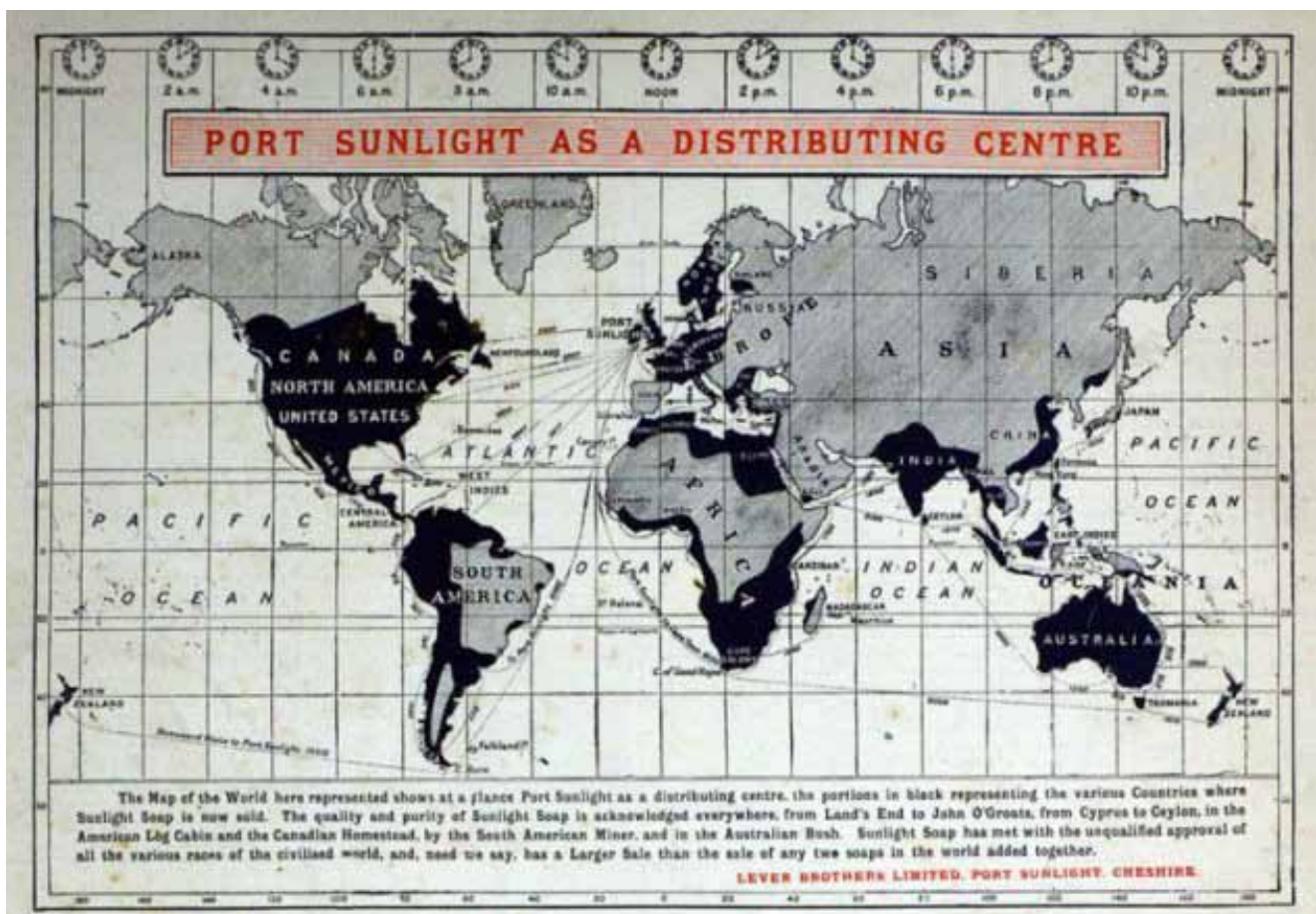
New Lanark (Lanarkshire, Scotland)

www.newlanark.org

Credits

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Lever Brothers poster (1898) - the countries in black show where Port Sunlight soap was exported worldwide
Reproduced courtesy of Grace's Guide - www.GracesGuide.co.uk

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