

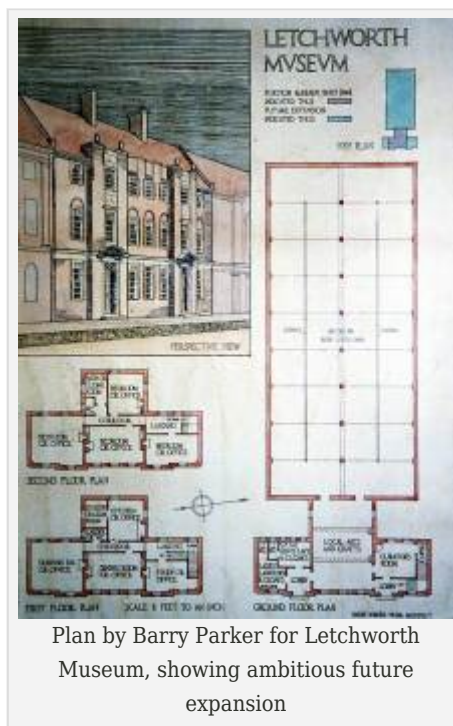
North Herts Museum Update: Building on the past for the future

One hundred years ago, the first part of Letchworth Museum was finished and opened to the public.



First single storey building of Letchworth Museum 1914

This was the first public building to be erected on Town Square, Broadway, and consisted of just one room, 9.1m x 6.1 m (30ft by 20ft), and a lobby. But this was just the beginning, and the architect Barry Parker had drawn up ambitious plans for a much larger building. While an extension adding two storeys to the original building was opened in 1920, much of the rear extension was never realised.



Plan by Barry Parker for Letchworth Museum, showing ambitious future expansion

The single storey museum was informally opened on Tuesday 20th October an hour before the annual meeting of the Letchworth Naturalists' Society. This was reported in the [Hertfordshire Express of the following Saturday](#), which has been digitised as part of the [Herts at War](#) project to make local newspapers of the Great War period available, with release of e-editions by *The Comet* on the relevant date. The *Pageant of Letchworth* by A W

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Brunt, Chairman of the Letchworth and District Natural History and Antiquarian Society (as the Naturalists were to become for a short time) records the opening date as 29th October 1914. There had been a stone-laying ceremony on 9th May 1914 but as the First World War had started by the time the museum opened, there was no opening ceremony.



The ceremonial stone-laying mallet from 9th May 1914 presented to Sir Herbert George Fordham

Rev E Everett had been the Secretary of the Society when discussions about [finding a site for the museum](#) had begun, but he did not live to see its completion. In July 1914, the Naturalists had elected W Percival Westell as Secretary. He became one of the initial specialist 'honorary curators' at the museum, soon becoming the 'honorary general curator', and going on to become the museum's first paid curator. For the first fourteen years of the museum's life, Percy Westell was paid nothing, though the museum charged an entrance fee of one old penny.

The Naturalists' Society had clear ideas about the arrangement of displays. They did not want a Victorian-style random collection of curios, but wanted to present scientifically-arranged displays of specimens to illustrate the natural and human history of the Letchworth area. They defined this area as including anything within a 12 mile radius of Letchworth. As the *Herts Express* noted:

"There is no reason at all to prevent the nature lovers of the district, and those who delight in tracing the history of life and of the race as revealed in geology and archaeology from uniting to cultivate and co-ordinate all the available knowledge of the district. Good work has already been done, and will continue, and it is hoped that the bond of union between the two principal towns in North Herts will be considerably aided by the new institution"

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Our new North Hertfordshire Museum will continue to build on the work of this first museum. Our collecting area has changed only slightly, and our new displays will use our collections from around the district, and not just the two towns mentioned 100 years ago, to illustrate the natural and human history of the area. We are looking forward to cultivating and co-ordinating the available knowledge of the district, and making it available to audiences old and new

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