

THE PREFAB POST

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Issue 6 Swedish Houses Special

Free

Swedish post-war prefabricated houses



Swedish timber homes have a fascinating place in the history of post-war prefabricated housing, writes Neil Midgley.

By the end of the Second World War there was a severe shortage of housing in Britain. Under the Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act of 1944, the Ministry of Works was to provide 500,000 prefabricated homes to tackle the shortage. In fact, only about 160,000 were built, including a number of Swedish Baltic-pine prefabricated homes.

Purpose and location

A memo from Frederic Marquis, the Minister of Reconstruction, to the War Cabinet on 14 of December 1944, requested that the Minister of Works be authorised “to purchase from Sweden up to 30,000 prefabricated timber houses of a type which would be suitable for permanent dwellings, especially in rural districts.”



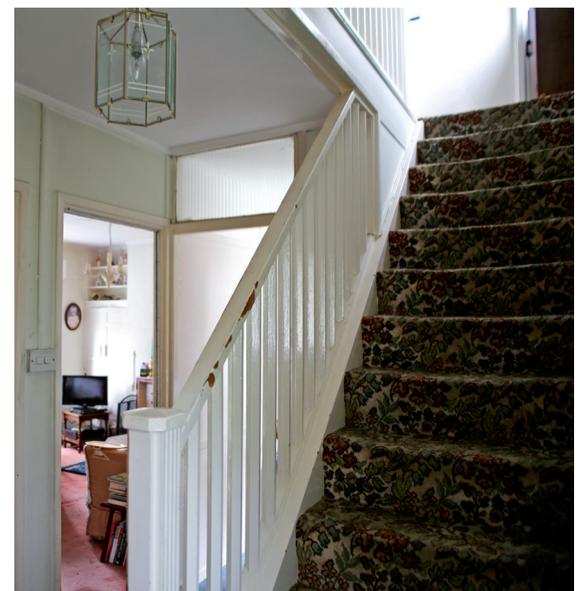
The memo reported that “the problem of securing adequate housing in rural areas is causing grave concern to the Minister of Health, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Minister of Agriculture. There is already an acute shortage, and this will be accentuated after the war as (a) the production of more live-stock and live-stock products, which will be necessary if agriculture is to help our foreign exchange position, will entail more labour, and (b) we shall want to train numbers of ex-servicemen for agricultural and rural pursuits.” The various types of prefab bungalows being planned/erected in urban areas were deemed to be both too temporary and unsuitable in design to meet the requirements.

This explains why, in England and Wales, the Swedish homes were distributed in small numbers to mainly rural areas (see the separate Location List on the Prefab Museum website). They were described as permanent but even so were given a life expectancy of just 60 years. Since then, “Many of these Swedish prefabs have been lost due to deterioration caused by climate, alteration or demolition” but many have survived beyond their 60 years and are still very valued homes today. A pair of the bungalow style at Auckley, South Yorkshire, have been awarded Grade II listed status by Historic England.

Costs

In many recipient communities the homes are, to this day, reputed to have been a post-war gift from the Swedish government as thanks for our war effort. In fact, much evidence points to the costs involved both to the government and to the local area. The 1944 memo suggests that the cost of a house would be about £240 on import with a total of more than £7,000,000 being paid to Sweden. The total cost per house erected in this country was expected to be about £800.

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Numbers

The Swedish scheme was administered separately from the main 1944 Temporary Housing Programme. Historic England report that “while 156,653 houses were erected under the latter programme, only 2,444 Swedish prefabs were erected, making them a rare type nationally.” Reports of the actual number of Swedish homes supplied vary considerably, ranging from this 2,444 up to 5,000, depending on the sources consulted. This discrepancy might be explained if the latter figure includes the 2,500 allotted to Scotland in the 1945 first tranche. What is certain is that numbers never reached anywhere near the 30,000 first requested.

Construction

They were exported flat-packed to England and Scotland between September 1945 and March 1946. The first ones were erected at Abbots Langley in Hertfordshire, an event that made front-page news as far afield as Australia with The Townsville Daily Bulletin newspaper for Saturday 3 November 1945 carrying a photo captioned, “Houses From Sweden For Use In England”, at the top of the front page. Immediately below is an article headed, “Hitler Suicided in Berlin”, an indication of the importance the editor placed on the house-building programme.

Besides being quicker to erect than standard houses, it was felt that the prefabricated design would require a less-skilled workforce. In some cases the construction work was carried out by prisoners of war who had not yet been repatriated.



Images Copyright Historic England



They were erected on pre-prepared bases with a brick plinth and services provided. The only other brickwork is the chimney stacks. The home itself was built from a timber frame, which was clad in the prefabricated vertical tongue-and-groove timber panels that are double thickness with insulation in between. They have quite steeply pitched plain tile roofs, a feature that helps to identify surviving examples today. The roofs are so very different from the flat ones of the urban prefabs. The majority were pairs of semi-detached dormer bungalows, with others being pairs of semi-detached houses.

The houses

The front door is protected by a porch and opens into a spacious hallway. Off this is a dining room with an open fireplace and French windows opening to the garden. Next is the lounge, which has a bay window overlooking the garden. A kitchen range and fire heated the hot-water cylinder, concealed in a cupboard alongside, and a tub in the ‘wash house’. There is a further fitted cupboard to the left of the fireplace. A second door from the lounge leads to the kitchen with a larder and then into the wash house. This had a heated washing tub, a large deep sink and a practical tiled floor. Off the wash house is a WC, a store room and a coal house. On the first floor there are three bedrooms and a bathroom/WC. The two larger bedrooms both have full-length fitted wardrobes. An airing cupboard takes advantage of the warmth from the chimney breast.

Swedish houses in Scotland

Style and location

In Scotland the styles of the timber prefabricated homes are quite different. At least six different designs of houses, without the single storey wash house extension, were erected in pairs of semis or in terraces of four or six. This may be partially explained by the fact that, as well as those from Sweden, some were imported from Finland. The distribution policy also seems to have been very different from England and Wales. Some of the homes were allocated in small numbers to rural locations, including the Isles of Orkney, Shetland and several of the Western Isles. In addition, a different style of bungalow was provided for its workers by the Scottish Forestry Commission on a number of its plantations. However, by far the majority in Scotland were erected in larger estates within towns and cities. Two estates of 50 homes each still remain in Edinburgh (in the West Pilton and Sighthill areas). An even larger development remains in the Balornock area of Glasgow. Thus it seems that while there are fewer locations in Scotland, there are far more actual homes than in England and Wales.

Numbers

In response to a question in parliament, Mr Buchanan reported on 23 October 1945, that “of the 5,000 timber houses ordered from Sweden, 2,500 have been allotted to Scotland”. However, progress on fulfilling that initial order did not seem to go well and was still incomplete in 1949. “The first programme for the erection of Swedish houses comprised 2,500 houses started in 1945 and is not yet completed owing to the failure of the government to ensure the steady and regular supply of components and materials. We are now about to start on a second programme of 1,000 houses.”

HOME SWEET HOME

Gillian Kennedy spent a happy childhood in a Swedish house in Pool-in-Wharfedale, Yorkshire.
The house still belongs to the family.

I was born in 1953, in a house just up the road. We always thought that the timber houses were a gift from Sweden. How very kind of Sweden! But apparently they weren't a gift. They were put up after the war because of the shortage of houses. It's a three-bedroom semi.

My parents had been in the airforce and had lost years of their lives. But they wouldn't complain about that because they knew that so many worse things had happened to people. When they came back, there were no jobs, no houses. So they lived with my grandfather and my dad's step-mother in a tiny house nearby. They lived under very strict rules. They were 30 years old. They had had serious jobs, vitally important jobs and then came back to that kind of life. They were eventually given a council house and they thought

it was wonderful. But this house became empty soon after and although they lived in a conventional house they came to have a look at it and decided they wanted to live in it. I'm really glad they made that decision. This is an especially lovely house so they were delighted.

I was five or six when we came here. I can remember the sound and smell when we first moved in. It had a lovely smell, all the floors are wooden. When I was young I had to share a room with my brother because we had lots of visitors from London. My parents were such hospitable people and there was always room to have people in and to enjoy company. The living room would be packed with people, with visiting relatives. I had a lovely childhood growing up in this house. On Saturday mornings we always had the fire lit, my brother

had his train set in the other room and we also had a ping pong table. Outside there were lots of fields and we are near a river – it was a lovely place to grow up.

My mum would often say how lovely it was that the sitting room was at the back of the house and the kitchen in the front so when she was standing doing the washing up – and I know this myself now – she could wave to people who were walking by. The lovely trees, the little lane going down to the river, it's all on view.

There was a big debate whether they should buy it [when Margaret Thatcher introduced the 'right to buy'] because of their political feelings it was rather difficult because they couldn't get a mortgage. I know that my brother gave them some money and one of my aunts in London.

I think my parents liked that it is a very light house, that there is a lot of space. I remember one day going to a semi-detached house to buy some old plates and I was surprised to go to this privately built house and to find a pokey dark hallway and a dark back room. I've got no central heating, just the fire. And for quite a few years I didn't have an immersion-heater. The fire would heat the water tank. It's such a clever design.

I think it's a very cheerful house. It feels like you're on holiday here. It's not dark and heavy, like a stone house. I feel like I can make noise in this house – sing, play the piano and laugh – and not worry about the noise bothering my neighbour because of the design of the house. I just love being here so I hope one day it will go to somebody who loves it too.



Image Elisabeth Blanchet

In October 2016, retired history teacher Neil Midgley contacted us about the Swedish post-war timber house in West Yorkshire that had been in his family since the 1950s.

Neil had already researched Swedish houses locally and the Grade II listed pair of dormer bungalows in Ellers Lane, Auckley. He wondered how many were left standing and if there was a case for listing his family house and others in Pool-in-Wharfedale. We published a blog post Swedish Post-War Prefabricated Houses – location list in January 2017, asking for help!

From a starting point in October 2016 of 16 locations in England and none in Wales or Scotland, we now have 171 locations across the UK: 129 in England, 5 in Wales and 37 in Scotland, with a total

of over 2300 Swedish prefabs recorded as still up and lived in.

How did this happen? The first comment on the blog arrived on the same day it was published, about Swedish houses in Airdrie, Scotland. This was swiftly followed by more locations in Warwickshire and Ayrshire, after which the locations kept on coming via comments and email – often multiple locations!

Swedish houses, like the post-war temporary bungalows, are very distinctive shapes on the old maps and were often helpfully named 'Swedish

Houses' or 'Swedish Cottages' and in one location Stockholm Crescent. They were sited in mainly rural locations and often only one or two pairs of houses or bungalows, so trying to find them unaided is an impossible task. We were able to verify locations on the old maps, including houses that were under threat or had been demolished.

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed locations, memories and photos of these unique and special homes that have lasted so long and are still treasured. As a thank you to our super prefab scouts who found and researched many locations for us we sent copies of Elisabeth's book Prefab Homes.

Jane Hearn



What's next for The Prefab Museum



We would like to thank all the participating museums and organisations that have welcomed and will welcome the Moving Prefab Museum to their venues. We will have travelled more than 3000 miles taking our prefabs knowledge and enthusiasm to meet and reach more than 3000 people across the UK. Many more have followed our progress on our website and Facebook page, and contributed memories, photos and locations to our archive and map. To date our website has attracted 77,000 visitors and we have recorded 2800 prefab locations and 95,000 prefabs! The online catalogue has been commissioned and is now in development – you will be able to search and view our archive in early 2018.

The talks we give, which aren't part of our Heritage Lottery Fund project but enable us to raise awareness about it and the heritage of prefabs, are in demand and very popular. More than 220 people attended the two talks at Redbridge Pensioners' Forum in August and Petts Wood Ladies Club in September. Since the start of the project we have delivered talks to nearly 600 people.

On 1st July we were in Malton, North Yorkshire, for an event at Eden Camp Modern History Theme Museum bringing our exhibition and giving guided tours of their Tarran prefab. They taught us how to pronounce 'Hull' correctly! The following month we visited West Yorkshire to see an original Swedish timber prefab house and bungalow, and interview Gill whose family has lived in the house since the 1950s. The history of Swedish houses, written by Gill's brother Neil, features in this issue of the Prefab Post.

Mickaël Sendra, director of Memoire de Soye, Brittany's very own prefab museum in Lorient, joined us at our event at the Rural Life Centre in July to view the potential site for the archive and prefab interpretive centre. We are now the proud owners of an original prefab destined for the UK as Ville de Lorient signed over the pieces of the dismantled American UK100 prefab to the Prefab Museum. Now all we need to do is bring it over and reassemble it!

The open weekend at the Wake Green Road prefabs on 16th – 17th September was an outstanding success, with 600 people visiting and national press coverage. Historic England has funded and supported a partnership between the Birmingham Conservation Trust, 20th Century Society West Midlands and the Prefab Museum to consult with local people about the future of the prefabs.

St Fagans National History Museum in Cardiff welcomed us on 23rd September. Our exhibition was in the newly restored Atrium and we thank Mared, Meinwen and Daffyd for being so supportive and helpful during the day!

We look forward to seeing some of you at our final events, and hearing from you via email, comments on the website and social media. Thank you for all your support and encouragement.

Our final events for the Moving Prefab Museum and Archive Project in 2017

Date and time:	Event:	Location:
14th October 11:00 - 16:00	Friends of Broomhill/Medway Archives Free entry	Medway Archives, 32 Bryant Road, Strood, Rochester ME2 3EP
2nd December 13:00 - 17:00	Our last event, an exhibition and archive tea party - all are welcome to join us! Please rsvp to prefabmuseum@gmail.com	St Johns Community Centre Glengall Grove, London E14 3NE

THE PREFAB POST

With thanks to Neil Midgley, Gillian Kennedy (nee Midgley), all the prefab scouts that have told us about Swedish house locations, Keara Stewart, Selim Korycki, Sonia Zhuravlyova.
The Prefab Post is printed with the help of the Heritage Lottery Fund.

THE PREFAB MUSEUM

The Prefab Museum is co-curated by Elisabeth Blanchet and Jane Hearn. We both love prefabs, especially the post-war ones. They were built to last 10 to 15 years in 1946 but are still standing today!

Contact: www.prefabmuseum.uk prefabmuseum@gmail.com
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