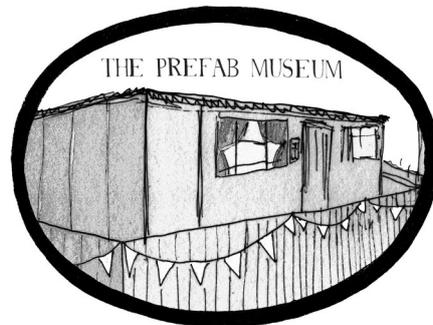


# The Moving Prefab Museum and Archive



## Education pack



[www.prefabmuseum.uk](http://www.prefabmuseum.uk)



# EDUCATION PACK

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## The Moving Prefab Museum and Archive

Elisabeth Blanchet and Jane Hearn, The Prefab Museum

The Moving Prefab Museum and Archive is a Heritage Lottery Fund project to explore, document, record and share the history, memories and photos of post-war prefabs to create a national archive.



*"Some people will think living in a prefab is like living in a box. Yes, it might sound or even look a bit like that but what a lovely, sophisticated box!"*

We are talking about post-war prefabs, erected in a hurry just after the Second World War when Britain was suffering an unprecedented housing shortage. More than 150,000 of these prefabricated houses were erected all over the UK from one or two on bomb sites to large estates of 700 and more. The biggest estate had over 1100 prefabs, at Belle Vale in Liverpool.

They were luxury to most of the residents who were mainly service personnel returning from the war and reuniting with their family, and people bombed out of their homes. Their prefab became their little palace with all mod cons and even more than any working class family could hope for at the time: hot water, toilet inside, bathroom, a fitted kitchen with a fridge, fitted cupboards and a garden all around the house. Part of the temporary housing programme, they were not supposed to last over a decade. Yet, over 70 years later, a few thousand are still standing and very much loved.

Why do people love their prefab so much, why are they so attached to their "cardboard or tin boxes"? Is it the layout of the prefab, the design of the interior, the garden around? Is it the sense of community they created? Or a combination of everything?

Elisabeth Blanchet has travelled all over the UK, from Redditch to Newport, Chesterfield, Catford and even the Isle of Lewis to try to draw some answers.

We ask you to detect all the different signs of attachment and love to the prefab and ask yourself the question: why do you think people love their prefab so much?

## Our aims

- To bridge the gap between different generations so young audiences can learn about mid-twentieth century/post-war Britain and about the sense of community and neighbourhood.
- To highlight prefabs in the context of British design and its influences through photos, archive documents and films showing how they were designed and erected.
- To give prefab residents and communities a voice through the process of change, looking more widely at the economic, political and social impacts on small communities and social housing. This is done through tracing and photographing surviving prefab estates, following campaigns to save prefabs from demolition, and interviewing the last of the original prefab residents.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS –

**Pre-fab:** Prefabricated building - a type of building that consists of several factory-built components or units that are assembled on-site to complete the unit

**Ministry of Works:** a department of the UK Government formed in 1943, during World War II, to organise the requisitioning of property for wartime use.

**Arcon, Uni-Seco, Tarran and the Aluminium:** Four types of single storey prefabricated buildings. Arcon (steel frame with asbestos cement cladding), Uni-Seco (flat roofed timber frame with asbestos cement wall sections), Tarran (wooden frame with precast Lignocrete panels), and Aluminium (made from recycled aircraft, in four sections).

**BISF:** a British steel framed house, designed and produced by the British Iron and Steel Federation.

## Books to read:

Elisabeth Blanchet, "Prefab Homes", 2014

Colin Davies, Professor of Architecture, , "The Prefabricated Home", 2005

Ian Abley, co-author of "Why is construction so backward?", 2004

Greg Stevenson "Palaces for the People, prefabricated homes in post-war Britain", 2003

Brenda Vale: "Prefabs: The history of the UK Temporary Housing Programme", 1995

Brian Finnimore, Architect, "Houses From The Factory", 1989

## Museums with prefabs

Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire—Arcon Mk V

Beamish Museum, Beamish, Durham—Airey houses (two storey)

Chiltern Open Air Museum, Chalfont St Giles, Buckinghamshire—Universal

Eden Camp Museum, Malton, North Yorkshire—Uni-Seco

Imperial War Museum, Duxford, Cambridgeshire—Uni-Seco

Rural Life Centre, Farnham, Surrey—Arcon Mk V

St Fagans Museum, Cardiff—Aluminium (AIROH)

## Community prefab archives online:

Belle Vale Prefabs on Facebook (Liverpool) <https://www.facebook.com/bellevalprefabs/>

Shrublands Community Archive (Norfolk) <http://shrublands.communityhistory.net/>

Epsom & Ewell History Society (Surrey) <http://www.epsomandewellhistoryexplorer.org.uk/MoreOnPrefabs.pdf>

Acocks Green (Birmingham) <http://aghs.jimdo.com/acocks-green-s-vulnerability/prefabs-updated/>

# HISTORY

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A London carpenter, Henry Manning, constructed a house that was built in components in 1837. It was one of the first advertised prefab houses, and was called the Manning Portable Cottage.

In 1855 during the Crimean War, after Florence Nightingale wrote a letter to *The Times*, Isambard Kingdom Brunel was commissioned to design a prefabricated modular hospital. In five months he designed a 1,000 patient hospital, with innovations in sanitation, ventilation and a flushing toilet.

Prefabricated homes were also produced during the Gold Rush in the United States, when kits were produced to enable Californian prospectors to quickly construct accommodation. The homes were available in kit form by mail order from 1908.

In 1943, the UK Government invested in a prototype, temporary steel bungalow, which became known as the "Portal Prototype". In a speech in March 1944, Prime Minister Winston Churchill promised 500,000 temporary new homes to deal with the acute housing shortage, although only 156,623 were produced (between 1945 and 1949). The first prototype was displayed outside the Tate Gallery, London in May 1944.

The prefabs had an important social function too. Many families, or couples, were living in rented rooms with shared facilities, or with the in-laws. Overcrowding, insanitary conditions and lack of privacy were real problems. Prefabs offered a proper detached home, which it was hoped would attract women out of the factories and enable men to return to work there.



A family outside their Uni-Seco prefab in Catford.

Designed for families with young children, these "palaces for the people" (as they were called at the time) were synonymous not only with comfort and luxury but also with freedom from the cramped and insanitary urban housing of pre-war Britain.

Intended to be a short-term solution to the post-war housing crisis, the prefabs were supposed to last only ten to fifteen years. However, there are still people living in and loving their original prefab homes on estates around the UK, including Catford, South London and Moseley, Birmingham, with a few models receiving grade II listed status.

**QUESTION –** What were the advantages of a prefabricated building/home? Do you think that people loved/love their prefab so much because they got them just after the war?

# DESIGN – ARCHITECTURE

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*“When we first started seriously to think about the prefabricated home, everybody jumped to the conclusion that it would lead to monotony. I say it offers us a way of building truly imaginative and exciting homes.” – Sir Richard Rogers, British architect*

Prefabs were built round a central core of kitchen, toilet and bathroom, designed by the Ministry of Works. They had two bedrooms, a fitted kitchen with fridge and cooker, running hot water, a wash boiler, and there was built in storage, electric lighting and sockets. For many, this was a huge leap in quality of life. Prefabs did not look like inter-war British houses, but more like American houses, so many thought they were American in design. Some American prefabs were imported, but most were British designed and built.



A Universal prefab at Chiltern Open Air Museum, Chalfont St Giles

There were four main types of temporary bungalows produced in Britain after the war – the Arcon, Uni-Seco, Tarran and the Aluminium. Ultimately, the most sophisticated layout of the standard 2-bedroom accommodation was that of the Arcon Mark V bungalow.

There was a lot of criticism when temporary accommodation after the war was first suggested. At the time there was little consultation with the public. Therefore this great technological advance in housing provision (in terms of both production and materials) received little acknowledgement in the architectural press either at the time or since.

Now-a-days, a lot of the housing built in the United States and abroad is, to some degree, prefabricated. McDonalds uses prefabricated structures for their buildings, and set a record of constructing a building and opening for business within 13 hours (on pre-prepared ground works). Additionally, in the UK, the major supermarkets have also each developed a modular unit system to shop building, based on the systems developed by German low cost retailers Aldi and Netto.

## QUESTIONS –

A lot of effort was put into the building, the design and the layout of the prefabs, can you give examples?

How did these efforts contribute to make residents love their prefab?

Can you think of a modern prefabricated building that you have seen recently?

# MAKE YOUR OWN PREFAB

If possible print on to card

**Main Walls**

Score and fold forward along black dotted lines

Score and fold back along white dotted lines

Score and fold back along white dotted lines

**Rear wall and Door**

**Front Door**

**Roof**

**Glue Window A Base**

**Glue Window B Base**

**Glue Window A Base**

**Glue Window D Base**

**Glue Window C Base**

**Glue Window A Base**

**Glue Window B Base**

**Door**

**Window A**

**Window B**

**Window C**

**Window D**

**Instructions**

1. Cut out, score and fold the main walls.
2. Cut out score and fold the rear wall and door. The main walls can be glued in these, forming a box.
3. Cut out and fold the roof. The gables can either be added to slope, left 190, or trimmed back to suit your location. Glue the roof to the top of the walls.

# COMMUNITY

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The 156,623 temporary bungalows produced in Britain under the 1944 Temporary Housing Programme were made with a design life of 10-15 years. However, a small percentage have lasted for decades, and some remain in good condition to this day.

Prefabs didn't look like inter-war British houses, but more like American houses with a garden and more space and privacy than traditional attached brick houses. Prefab estates around the country were designed with a sense of community, sometimes around a green and connected by footpaths, giving them the feel of holiday villages.

People liked them straight away, as well as the lifestyle they created; families were from the same working-class background and of similar ages. Prefabs became synonymous with sense of community.

Many of the prefab occupants remained in their original prefab until it was demolished. After Margaret Thatcher allowed council tenants to buy their own homes, many purchased their prefabs.



Some residents even reported that they planned for a second child when the council told them that having just one didn't qualify them for a prefab.

Living in a prefab gave many people a strong sense of identity, and residents proudly rebutted jokes about living in 'Asbestosville' or 'Tin Town'. Others left their prefab only to find that traditional housing wasn't for them, and then had to wait years on the council housing list to get another prefab.

## QUESTIONS –

Can you spot signs of a sense of community between prefabs' residents? What are they?

Do you think they are unique to residents of prefabs or could they be found in other communities?

Do you think the sense of community is dying among the prefab residents? And explain why?

# TODAY AND THE FUTURE

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Since 2003 the largest concentrations of surviving prefabs were in Bristol/Avonmouth (around 700 in over 14 estates), Newport (c. 300 Arcons) and Cafford in London (187 Uni-Secos). Many of these homes have been demolished, part demolished or are threatened with demolition and redevelopment. Large numbers of permanent prefab types do remain however, including many BISF homes, and a well-preserved group of mobile homes could be found until recently by South Bank University, off the Borough Road in London. Some prefabs have been re-clad and refurbished by councils and housing associations in Ipswich, Ellesmere Port, Boston and south Cambridgeshire.

Architects are now incorporating modern designs into the prefabricated houses of today. Prefab housing should no longer be compared to a mobile home in terms of appearance, but to that of a complex modernist design.

The challenge, however, is to combine the need for mobility and sustainability with a building design that appeals to clients and overcomes potentially negative stereotypes that are conventionally associated with prefab.

There has also been an increase in the use of “green” materials in the construction of these prefab houses. Consumers can easily select between different environmentally friendly finishes and wall systems. Since these homes are built in parts, it is easy for a homeowner to add additional rooms or even solar panels to the roofs. Many prefab houses can be customized to the client’s specific location and climate, making prefab homes much more flexible and modern than before.

Today much of the housing being built is, to a lesser or greater degree, prefabricated. The Boklok is an affordable prefab housing concept developed by the furniture retailer Ikea with the construction and civil engineering company Skanska, and the architect Richard Rogers’ practice has developed the prefabricated Y:Cube for the YMCA. It seems increasingly likely that there will be yet another call for the palaces for the people.

## QUESTIONS –

Do you think that today, there could be new prefab estates as a response to the present housing shortage? Explain your point of view.

According to you, why are residents of prefabs still fighting to save them and why do they love them so much?

## Quotes & Stories from Prefab residents

### **Jim Blackender, 59, ex-Excalibur Estate resident**

Jim Blackender was in charge of the Tenants’ Group to save the Excalibur prefabs from demolition by Lewisham Council. He lost the campaign and, disappointed, he moved out of his prefab in Autumn 2012. *“I liked everything about the prefab – I couldn’t put a finger on it. It was the people, the location. When we moved in 20-odd years ago there was a really strong community, and there was no way anyone could have taken that place from the residents. But it’s been left to rot – it’s depressing to watch it fall into disrepair.”*

### **Bernard Dye, 84, Killamarsh, north-east Derbyshire**

There were 49 prefabs in Killamarsh, called Tarrans after the name of their manufacturer, Tarran Industries. The Council decided to have the estate regenerated and the prefabs replaced by modern bungalows. *“There’s a sense of community, people keep an eye on each other, to make sure everybody is ok. I like that there are no stairs, no upstairs to look after. In fact, when I want to Hoover the complete bungalow, I can use one socket in the entrance hall, and I can Hoover every room in the house. Hopefully they will be remembered fondly by the incumbent tenants and will live on in the annals of Killamarsh past.”*