



THE PREFAB POST

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Issue 4 Excalibur Estate Special Edition

Free

The Prefab Years

Brian Clare grew up in 17 Meliot Road on the Excalibur Estate, which later became the home of the Prefab Museum.

My family spent most of the war years in Leicester where my father worked in an aircraft factory and we moved back to London shortly after VE Day in 1945. Initially, my father went to live with his mother on Plumstead Common but mum, my brother Barry and sister Tina (Anita was born in July 1945) and I went to live with mum's parents in Woolwich. About a year later we moved into the prefab (with my father) in time for a bitterly cold winter. It was one of the worst winters on record.

Rationing was still in place, food and fuel could not be delivered due to the weather and there were frequent power cuts – I can remember pushing an old pram down Bellingham Road to collect coal from the station yard. Nevertheless, the prefab was a modern, unheard of style of living for us with a fridge, immersion heater, hot water, indoor bath and toilet, built-in cupboards and storage space and fitted kitchen. The source of heating was a very efficient fire in the living room. It had to be cleaned and re-lit every morning and that was usual in all dwellings in those days.

I had taken the 11-plus in Leicester and passed and obtained a place at the Roan School Greenwich (then a grammar) and to get there I either walked down Torridon Road to Brownhill Road to catch the 75 bus or down Whitefoot Lane to Bromley Road to catch the 54 to Blackheath. Barry went to Torridon Road Primary and did so well that he gained a scholarship at St Paul's School in Hammersmith and to get there he had to catch a Green Line bus at about 7.30 in the morning.



Barry Clare and Jimmy O'Mahony (Eddie's oldest son) at 6 Persant Road or 17 Meliot Road, Excalibur Estate, 1950s. Copyright : Clare family



Tina Clare and her mother at 17 Meliot Road, Excalibur Estate, 1950s. Copyright : Clare family

Tina also passed the 11-plus and went to Prendergast Girls School at Lewisham. I made many friends in the neighbourhood and was mad keen on football. I spent hours playing the game at Forster Park. I took the very last School Certificate exam in 1950, passed at matriculation level (with a 'Distinction' in French!) and opted to stay on in the sixth form taking French, Spanish and Latin without any clear idea of what I wanted to do. Just before Christmas 1950 my father asked me what I wanted to do when I left school and I said I did not know, so he made me leave the following February. He had arranged with a friend of his to give me a job in the circulation department at the *News of the World*.

A couple of months later he left for good and eventually my mother divorced him. From then on poor old mum literally scrubbed floors to make ends meet and, regrettably, it was only when I became a parent myself that I realised what sacrifices she made for us. In 1952 I undertook two years of National Service – it certainly did me good.

When I left the army in August 1954, instead of returning to the *News of the World* I started work in an advertising agency in Fleet Street. At this time I was very much into football and through my group of friends met my wife Jean who lived in Longhill Road. It would be easy to feel bitter that my father forced me to leave school when I did, but if I had not, that whole pattern of my life would have been different and I probably would not have met Jean.

Just before I was called up I was introduced to jazz by a friend and Barry and I became enthusiasts for the music; when I finished my army service I was a frequent visitor to a thriving jazz club at the old Tiger's Head at the foot of Whitefoot Lane. Sometime in the mid 1950s I bought a motorbike which, at first, I kept in the hall of the prefab. When I left, there was a dent in the metal cupboard in the hall. Eventually I managed to build a shed for the machine in the garden. In the late 1950s I traded the motorbike in for my first car – an old Morris Oxford, which we obviously had to park in the road. I learnt to drive it without any driving lessons and passed my test first time. The car was quite old and on a trip down to Maidstone, the big ends disintegrated and we were towed home. This required some serious repairs that I could not possibly afford, so Barry and I jacked the car up in the road and more or less rebuilt the engine ourselves.

Our immediate neighbours at No 18 were the Jupps with whom we got on very well. I seem to remember that the family at the far end of our 'alleyway' leading to Ector Road were called Hutchinson and they had a daughter called June. Across the road and several houses down the alleyway opposite was a Mrs Gladys Dyson who mum was very friendly with. I was quite friendly with a lad called Billy Welch who lived further down Meliot Road.

When I finished National Service in 1954 I was still a football enthusiast and played at various times for Catford United, Goldsmiths United and Brockley FC and I am still in touch with a few of my friends from those times. Jean and I married in April 1964 and bought a house in Sidcup and then moved to Welling where we now live. We have two married daughters and five granddaughters and will shortly be celebrating our 53rd wedding anniversary.



Brian Clare's old Morris, parked outside 17 Meliot Road, 1950s. Copyright : Clare family

Ted Carter

& Eddie O'Mahony

All Images © Elisabeth Blanchet



Eddie O'Mahony and Ted Carter spent most of their lives on the Excalibur estate and loved living here. Eddie passed away in December 2015 and Ted in February this year and here we pay tribute to the prefabs' greatest fans.



Eddie O'Mahony:
"I don't like to think of the prefabs being pulled down. It breaks my heart. I close my eyes when I pass the ones that are boarded up. I've loved this place from day one."



Ted Carter:
"The prefabs were given to us to house bombed-out Londoners – they're just as good today as when they were put up, amazing!"



Eddie O'Mahony:
"They were supposed to last just 10 years. Before the 10 years were up, I formed a committee on the estate to fight so the prefabs will stay, we called ourselves the bungalow action group."



Ted Carter:
"People have been happy in the prefabs for 60 years now – but now they're being torn down because the ground is worth millions of pounds."



Eddie O'Mahony:
"I praise the German POWs, they made a marvellous job of putting up the prefabs – they're still up!"



Overview of The Excalibur Estate, 2005. © Elisabeth Blanchet

Astrid Zweynert's impressions of her recent trip to the Excalibur Estate

The story of housing in Britain has fascinated me since I arrived here almost 30 years ago from Germany – a country where ownership of homes is a lot less common than in Britain and where rented housing generally is of a higher standard and more affordable.

There seems little forward thinking here about people's housing needs – unless you have deep pockets to buy your own castle. It struck me when I read an article about the Prefab Museum that building prefabs was a rare example of a forward-looking government thinking about people's housing needs after World War Two ahead of time rather than trying to sort out the mess afterwards.

When my colleague Claudio and I went to the Excalibur Estate in Catford in February, I immediately got a sense that this was a place where people didn't just inhabit a space but where a community lived together with great pride in its homes and surroundings.

The small houses, with their generous gardens, well looked after by people who nowadays at crazy market rates would not be able to afford such housing, looked like they were part of a gentle world that doesn't exist anymore.

It was sweet for me to hear that a German prisoner of war who helped build the prefabs even made friends with a former British soldier who came to live there.

During an earlier Prefab Museum workshop with Elisabeth and Jane in Birmingham I had already learned how prefabs were not only technologically advanced for their time but also built to help people put down roots by providing them with affordable housing they were happy and proud to live in.

I'm sorry I didn't get to see the Excalibur when it was in its full splendour but glad that I managed to see this important piece of social and architectural history before it is completely demolished.

Christine, a long-term resident of the estate, told us how people on the Excalibur look out for each other. "This is my friendly little place and I love it," Christine said of the prefab that has been her home for more than 30 years. But she is facing eviction and an uncertain future as the redevelopment of the area gathers pace.

Prefabrication is making a comeback now in Britain as it is trying to tackle its chronic housing shortage - but from what I can see, a sense of community doesn't come prefabricated with the new type of prefabs. It is what people like Christine and many other prefab residents created with care, solidarity and attention to detail.

The Prefab Museum advised BBC Northern Ireland on their recent history series *Britain's Home Truths*. Episode 1, presented by Gregg Wallace and broadcast on 20th February 2017, featured the Excalibur Estate and an interview with Patricia, one of the residents

The history of Excalibur

The North Downham estate was planned by the London County Council in 1935 and developed on an area north of Whitefoot Lane, known locally as Perry's Farm. Sixteen acres were reserved for an open space, a doctor's surgery, shops and a community centre.

The open space was requisitioned for allotments in 1941 and again under the Temporary Housing Programme in 1944. The Excalibur prefab estate was built from 1946-7 and 189 Uni-Seco prefabs were erected, six of which were listed Grade II in March 2009. German and Italian prisoners of war, incarcerated in camps at Shooter's Hill and Beckenham Place Park, assisted with building the prefabs, the drainage and the roads.



Prefab garden in bloom on the Excalibur Estate, 2005. © Elisabeth Blanchet



What is new for The Prefab Museum in 2017



In January 2017 we held our second archive workshop at the Coffin Works in Birmingham. Sisters Andree Jones and Pat Cutler, who grew up in an American prefab in Selly Oak, joined us to discuss the archive from former prefab residents' perspective and what they would like to see. We were also joined by Astrid Zweynert from Thomson Reuters Foundation who was writing a feature on us and prefabs, and Lou Robson from 20th Century Society West Midlands. A productive day was followed by an evening talk at the Gunmakers' Arms. More than 50 people attended the talk.

We delivered three talks between January and March to Redbridge Osteomates Group, Age UK Islington and Ilford JACS (Jewish Association of Cultural Societies). The talks are well attended and diverse with much interest shown in the history of prefabs. Talks aren't part of our Heritage Lottery Fund project, if you are interested in attending please contact the organisations directly.

We were invited to the Chiltern Open Air Museum in February to examine their archive about the Universal prefab and other prefab-related documents. Thanks to Cathy and Hazel for making us so welcome! Hamish from Avoncroft Museum wrote to us to let us know they have restored the fire and heating system in their Arcon MkV. Judy and Emma from Rural Life Centre sent us a DVD of the opening of their prefab in 2005 which included the fascinating story of their Arcon MkV prefab, you can read about it on our website.

We have been working with super-prefab scout Neil Midgely, who is researching the history and locations of Swedish houses in the UK. His guest blog post on our website is a great example of crowdsourcing, as many people have contacted us with new locations and information from Scotland to Somerset!

The new website has been an outstanding success, and our regular blog posts are widely read. Since it was launched last June over 32,500 visitors have been to the site, with over 112,000 page views. We are now working to integrate the prefabs archive into our website and develop the map. We would like to thank the prefab scouts and everyone who has contacted us to tell us about prefabs they lived in or are still up, for letting us reproduce and share their photos and memories, and who have shown their appreciation for our work in preserving and celebrating the heritage of post-war prefabs. Please let us know if we have missed any!

In 2017 we will be visiting several new and some familiar venues across the UK.

13th April

19:00 Evening talk at the Village Hall, Rural Life Centre. Reeds Road, Tilford, Farnham, Surrey, GU10 2DL. Please contact the centre for details.

6th May

11:00 – 15:30 Joint event with 'Capturing the Spirit – Community Archive for Paulsgrove and Wymering'. Highslopes Community Centre, Carlton Road, Porchester, Fareham PO16 8JH.

13th May

11:00 – 16:00 Friends of the Island History Trust Open Day. St John's Community Centre, Glengall Grove, London, E14 3NE.

1st July

10:00 – 17:00 Eden Camp Modern History Theme Museum. Malton, North Yorkshire YO17 6RT. Museum entry fee applies.

16th July

10:00 – 17:00 Rural Life Centre. Reeds Road, Tilford, Farnham, Surrey GU10 2DL. Museum entry fee applies.

23rd September

10:00 – 17:00 St Fagan's National History Museum. Cardiff CF5 6XB.

3rd October

14:30 – 17:00 Talk at Silver End Heritage Society. Silver End, Witham CM8 3QF. Please contact the society for details.

Please check our website and social media for updates to our events calendar.

www.prefabmuseum.uk

www.facebook.com/PalacesForThePeople

www.twitter.com/Prefabs_UK

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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
www.facebook.com/PalacesForThePeople