

Abbots Gardens

I was born in a prefab at 48 Abbots Gardens, Shrewsbury in 1951 and lived there until our family, the Fords, moved to a new house, built by my Dad, Joe, in 1960. The new house was bigger, much bigger, and in a nicer part of town but I have always looked back on number 48 with affection and longing. I don't think I have ever since felt so closely connected to a community of neighbours and friends as I did during those early years of my life. I know that feeling is partly the result of a deceptively warm glow of nostalgia, but there is a strong core of truth behind it.

Our house was one of a collection of 1940s-constructed, detached, prefabricated bungalow houses, or "prefabs" as they were popularly called, built to help solve the post-war housing crisis as the returning heroes looked to establish their new war-wives and families. Apart from the small development, of which Abbots Gardens was part, I don't recall any more of these single-story prefabs in Shrewsbury. There were semi-detached two-story prefabricated homes, "the steel houses" as they were called, half a mile away, off Crowmere Road. But the forty or so prefabs stood in relative isolation amongst the ocean of pre-war, brick-built traditional council houses that dominated the Monkmoor area of town.

The prefabs themselves were all, of course, built to a standard rectangular format so that they could be factory manufactured cheaply and assembled quickly on site. One bedroom and the living-room faced out onto the street, across an American-style open lawn, the front door and hall dividing these two rooms and leading into a bathroom and a further bedroom at the back. At the back right of the rectangle was the kitchen, opening out through the backdoor into the garden and also accessed through the living room. The prefabs had no garages, presumably deemed either unnecessary or unnecessarily expensive, so any cars or vans, and there weren't many, were parked on the grass strip at the front. In our case, Dad's ancient, three-wheeler Reliant van with its protruding, spoked front wheel stood in front of the house when he returned from work. On cold winter mornings, when even the starter handle couldn't spark the Reliant to life, my sisters, Ursula and Mel, and I had the mortifying task of pushing the van off the grass patch and down the road to get it going.



Mel, Peter and Hilary Ball outside No 48.



Richard Gough, Peter and Hilary next door

The path to our front door, at number 48, bisected the front lawn and then ran round the front and then the right-hand side of the house to the backdoor which faced on to the back garden. Just where the path turned that final corner, stood our small shed,

an old Anderson shelter, with its green, corrugated roof. It was just high enough for me to climb up on from the top of the metal rubbish bin and the shed's warm roof with the regular, pattern of painted rivets at its peak provided both a helpful vantage point and refuge for a small boy. Sitting on the roof, facing forward, I looked out onto the road, turning left I could see Mrs Twoose's house next door, just over the fence, and turning right I could look out over our wild back garden to the Gough's house and orderly garden on the other side, maybe catching a glimpse of the Randalls', next door but one. If I turned round and faced directly backwards, I could see across our wire back fence to the line of prefabs that faced the next and last street of the development. Beyond that, but out of sight to me from the shed, was the enormous open space of the old racecourse, an unfettered grass playground during the summer months.



Peter, Mel and friends looking out from 48

In front of the house stood a more frequent and familiar play area. A long triangle of grass lay between Abbots Gardens as it made its slight, gradual descent to meet Abbots Road. This triangle was partially bisected by a dense hedge, the remains of an old field, which ran parallel to our road. The hedge was terminated, directly in front of our house, by a very large elm tree. After a gap, a slightly smaller, companion tree grew in the apex of the grass triangle just before Abbots Garden's confluence with Abbots Road.



Peter and pals with marbles area to the right

The play possibilities were endless. Football, of course, on either side of the hedge, was always a popular option, although the grass could be thick and unforgiving and the uneven ground was a hazard to ankles. Marbles, using the bare earth worn by countless children in front of the larger of the two trees, cannoning the hard glass balls into small holes carved into the hard ground. Climbing the trees themselves,

particularly the larger one, using nails hammered into the trunk to help the smaller children scramble towards the lower branches. Cowboys and Indians, using the hedge as a hiding place from which to mount attacks on our rivals.

And then there was tick in all its forms. Basic tick, in which you simply tagged another child and then he or she was "it" until they, in turn, could tag another. Tick off-ground, in which you could not be tagged if you could find refuge on top of an object, a tree trunk or a front doorstep, for example - or, my favourite, ball tick, in which you used a tennis ball to tag your fellow players. You could simply touch them with the ball to make them "it", if you were quick enough to catch them, or you could throw the ball, taking a bigger risk of missing the greater the distance the ball was thrown. Ball tick was a particularly communal game sometimes attracting up to twenty children of varying ages to the triangle, racing round the hedge and trees, ducking and diving to avoid the ball as it was hurled towards you, squealing and screaming in excitement. The numbers playing gradually dwindling towards dusk as parents called us in for the night, although I seem to remember parents often acquiescing to a plea of "Please, just ten more minutes!", as they did their duty by asking us to come in but were grateful for a little more peace.



Peter in the backgarden



Ursula with Aunt Cecily

Our back garden, the untended wilderness, was an all-year round delight to me as a child. Coming out of the backdoor, about a third of the garden on the left-hand side was a tangle of wild raspberry and blackberry bushes, prickly but capable, with great care, of being pushed, bent and burrowed into a nest of secret dens. Otherwise, the garden, from the path behind the backdoor across to the line of our fence, sweeping around and up to the back of the shed, was covered in clumps of long, coarse grass, the remains of the waste-ground it used to be. In the far, right-hand corner, in the angle of the fence, there was a little hillock behind which an almost imperceptible hollow offered a great hiding place for small child. A place in which you could hide from family and friends alike and spin whatever web of fantasy you chose, from Cowboys and Indians, to Pirates, to Soldiers and back to Cowboys and Indians again.

It's difficult to imagine now just how strong a part Cowboys and Indians played in the culture of post-war Britain, particularly of its children, reinforced by the regular diet of Hollywood Cowboy B-movies shown in the children's matinee at the Granada. It was the first call for solo play as well as group play although persuading someone to take on the Indian role was always difficult. We were probably not capable of picking

up on any subtle subtext, if there was any, in the films we saw, so the Cowboys we played were almost invariably the heroes and the Indians the villains. Unless, of course, you ended up as the Indian yourself, in which case you tried to imbue your character with more bravery and nobility than the “cannon-fodder” they were generally portrayed as on film.

Dressing up as well as the equipment, particularly guns and hats, helped to underpin the role-play. Cheap plastic pistols and rifles could be had from Woolworths of course but they were likely to break within a week. What we really venerated, though, were the more substantial, almost replica, guns owned by some of the older boys. Richard Gough, the teenage son next door to us, had one and I can clearly remember the thrill when he let me hold that pistol with its chunky “bone” handle. The weight was so much more convincing than the light, fragile casing of a Woolies gun.

As evidence of the importance to me of Cowboys and Indians and the equipment that went with it, I offer a photograph of me taken in the prefab back garden on my fourth birthday, with my sisters and perched astride an old rocking horse.



A copy of the photo sits on the sideboard in my house now, a gift from my late sister, Ursula. Mel holds the rocking horse’s head and her left hand rests on my right arm. Ursula is directly behind me, her right hand holding mine and helping me point a plastic gun straight at the camera, with her left hand gently holding my upper left arm, making sure I don’t slip out of the saddle. Both girls wear home-made print dresses. The backdrop is the pre-fab garden’s five-foot high tangled mass of raspberry and blackberry bushes. Mel gazes steadily and expressionless at the camera but Ursula and I both wear goofy, slightly embarrassed grins. I seem to be wearing pyjama trousers, suggesting an early morning photo before the girls left for school and, over a t-shirt, I am resplendent in a studded jerkin jacket, with faux leather cowboy fringing, and matching gun-belt and holster. Perched on my head, tilted slightly backwards to show the brutal fringe of my haircut, sits a pointed cowboy hat, a light string secured to both sides of the brim and resting in a knot under my chin.

This was one of the happiest days of my life, not just because the present of a cowboy outfit was perfect but because I had a party too, the only one I can ever remember having. We started the party in the sunlit back garden using our kitchen table and chairs, carried out through the backdoor and decorated with sandwiches

and cakes, some of them contributed by Mrs Twoose from next door who also helped look after us that day. When it started to pelt down with rain, as a thunder storm forced us indoors, tall, red-headed Mrs Twoose and Mum made sure that the children, the table and chairs and the food were carried as quickly as possible into the safety of the kitchen. Somehow, at least in recollection, this sudden change also seems perfect, as if starting out in the sunlight and open air and finishing in the cosy safety of the kitchen had always been part of the plan.

The house itself, the prefab, was simplicity itself. Two small, double bedrooms, a bathroom, the living room and the kitchen. Mum and Dad had the bedroom at the back and the kids had the bedroom at the front, sharing two beds between three of us, and then four when my brother, Paul, arrived. There was a spell, before Paul was born, when Granny Rigby, my Mother's widowed Mum, stayed with us regularly as she circulated between two of her daughters, Eileen in St Helens and my Mother, Josie.

I have a very limited visual memory of Granny Rigby, and it's probably based on photographs, but I do have a strong recollection of her whispering to me as I lay down to sleep: "Goodnight, sleep tight, mind the bugs don't bite". She did this every night, as I lay waiting for her to come, and I wonder whether she was repeating a mantra she had offered to her own children forty or fifty years previously. I think I used to share a bed with Ursula when I was very small so, when Granny called, she must have shared the other, saggy-mattressed bed in that room with Mel. Paul was born in 1955 and Granny died not long before Paul's birth. Now I think of it, 1955 was also the year of my fourth birthday, less than a month after Paul's birth and at a time when Granny's death was still a raw wound. That helps explain, perhaps, why such a fuss was made of me on that birthday in particular and why Mrs Twoose was so active in the arrangements on the day. It's odd when trying to piece the past together and it reveals odd kernels of truth to you for the first time.

I don't have any memories of either my parent's bedroom or the bathroom but that's because that bedroom would have been off limits and because, for a 50s child, bathrooms were functional rather than recreational. And, apart from using the toilet itself, visits were not frequent, for a weekly bath and for face and hands washes in the morning. I needed to be scrubbed clean more regularly than that, given the amount of time spent digging and crawling about in gardens and waste ground or playing football, but the kitchen sink would suffice for most routine operations.

The living room faced towards the Abbots Gardens and, through the two elm trees, out across Abbots Road. But despite the comparatively open vista, the living room seems a dark and quiet place in my memory. Not a dismal dark but a restful, muted light. That's because, if the weather was fine, winter or summer, we were expected to be out playing whilst it was light and not to trouble our parents except for rare refueling stops. So the living room was a place for quiet play, cars on the patterned carpet, or for listening to the radio, which rested on an occasional table in the corner of the room.

My sisters both later told me that I spent an inordinate amount of time lost in the radio. My preferred listening position was standing close to the radio as, in the days before portable transistor radios let alone headphones, this was the only way of

ensuring uninterrupted immersion. I remember “Children’s Hour”, in the late afternoon, whose broad catalogue included the beautifully dramatised “Just So Stories” as well as the strange world of “Toytown”, with its odd cast of animal and human characters, amongst them Larry the Lamb, with his strangulated bleat of a voice. But there was also the more comforting “Listen with Mother” in the early weekday afternoon and Children’s Favourites each Saturday morning, introduced by Uncle Mac. I enjoyed the escape into alternative worlds.

The kitchen was the working hub of the prefab: the sink, the mangle, the cooker, the pantry, the kitchen table and chairs where all meals were eaten. Even without a fridge, how did we fit all that activity into such a small space? I think that was one of the great secrets of pre-fab and of life in the post-war years. The pre-fabs were designed to make the best use of the space and building resources available whilst, for many, providing a first taste of life with an inside toilet and bathroom. There was very limited space for storing anything we did not use regularly but equally, in those days, we did not have the masses of unused or under-used stuff that is so essential to us now – that we need to keep and store in cupboards, lofts and garages.

The focus then was on using what you had as much as possible. So, the kitchen table was the party table in the garden on my fourth birthday and the kitchen chairs doubled as car seats when we children travelled in the back of Dad’s van. I am not saying life then was better, and I am sure that in many ways things were tougher and more difficult, but perhaps things were a little simpler and freer from “the tyranny of choice”.

Peter Ford

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