



Andree Jones and Pat Cutler, Birmingham

Recorded as part of The Moving Prefab Museum and Archive Project, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

PRM00090_JONES_CUTLER_Birmingham.mp3

24/7/16

Avoncroft Museum, Bromsgrove

Interview by Elisabeth Blanchet with Andree Jones and Pat Cutler

Transcribed by Sonia Zhuravlyova March 2018

Do you have many prefabs in France?

Elisabeth: Yeah, we had about the same number. In this country in the UK there were 156,000 built, just after the war. And in France, north of France Normandy, Brittany, because that is where we were bombed 154,000 and so it is very similar. And the American one, we have the same in France, because 8,000 came to the UK and 8,000 came to France. You have still I would say more than 100 or 150 American prefabs still lived in. So you can see them in Le Harve and you got some in Lorient and you got one or two in Cann. And there is a friend of mine who has got a little museum in Lorient and he has resembled an American prefab. So if you go on holiday in Brittany, you have to go that museum.

There is none in the UK, is there?

No, there is one that is used as a sailing club in Snettisham in Norfolk.

Andree and Pat, so you lived in an American prefab in Birmingham, when did you move into the prefab?

AJ: It would be about 1951, and I was six.

PC: And I would have been five.

AJ: And they pulled them down when I was 15, so just over nine years I would think we were in.

PC: But they were happy days.

Do you know why your parents got the prefabs?

AJ: Yes because they were living with my granddad, and it was all overcrowded, really overcrowded, and it was through an MP, I can't think of his name now.



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PC: Roy Jenkins, the MP.

AJ: Mum was the first one in the family, to move over to the south side of Birmingham because we lived in Stechford. And I think it was a bit of a shock to the family that we were going on to south of Birmingham. But it was good. Because from that we had a lot of good memories with our cousins that came over to stay, and the whole thing was really good for us. But there was also a sense of pride in the community.

PC: Gardens were tidy.

AJ: It was run by Birmingham Council, and I've got a certificate where they you used to have competitions between all the gardens. And I've still got it. It was a conciliation prize and I still got it. All the gardens, only the odd one, but they all looked neat, well cared for.

PC: And you always kept an eye on the neighbour's chimneys, catching fire.

AJ: And that was the first thing you were taught. Because of the fire risk, mum used to always...

PC: Yeah, you always kept an eye on the kindle.

Yeah because it was the American type, and they were made out of something called Homasote, which is a bit of a cardboard basically like papier-mâché, so it could catch fire very...

PC: Because dad used to clean the chimney, didn't he?

AJ: Yes. We had an open fire.

PC: We had an open fire.

AJ: It was an open fire because it kept spitting, didn't it, it kept spitting onto the rug. We had to be careful.

PC: Yeah, we had an open fire.

It was lovely because most people – they made toast.

AJ: But it always looked cosy, always looked cosy, although in the winter like I've said we had... ice inside.

PC: Ice inside, but so did a lot of people, so did lot of people. But the one thing I've never forgotten is the wooden draining board in the kitchen, you know because you just don't see that...



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AJ: You had your own bathroom, built-in wardrobes,

You shared the same room?

AJ: Yes, and when we moved we didn't want, we went to a three-bedroom house when we moved, we wanted to be together.

PC: But we stayed in the same.

AJ: But I think the community there was good.

How many prefabs were there, do you remember?

AJ: There was...

PC: Because there was Gatley Grove and Flatley Grove.

AJ: So would there have been about 100?

PC: I don't know, but there would be parties in the Grove for different things.

AJ: When we moved in, it was the Queen's coronation, and we didn't know anybody so mum and dad decided that we would go to our aunt and uncle's, and we came back and the whole grove was all celebrating but we weren't part of it then. But everybody did look after each other.

PC: They did, they were very caring neighbours.

AJ: Protective, I think, perhaps you don't see so much nowadays.

PC: To me, I always remember all the gardens tidy.

Every prefab had its own garden around.

PC: Yes, right round. You didn't see untidy gardens, did you?

AJ: No.

PC: But you see the rent man comes round anyway.

AJ: But he would collect. And also there was the bread man, the milkman and the coal man. And we were supposed to check, count the coal. That was the job we were given, if mum wasn't there, we had to count the bags in case he diddled us, I don't know what she expected us to do, I really don't.

PC: In the snow everybody, well the kids really cleared all the paths. And all the elderly always had their paths cleared. It was automatic, wasn't?



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AJ: There is only one person we still know, Mrs Brooks. Oh and Carol, who I am still in contact and that is from there.

PC: Which is a heck of a long time ago.

And what was your dad doing, what was his job?

AJ: He worked at the Austin company. He always when he came down the road, always whistled, gave a whistle out.

PC: So did Mr Healy.

AJ: Yes, they both did, so we knew he was coming.

And can you tell me the address of the prefab?

PC: 21 Gatley Grove, Selly Oak.

And do you know what is there now?

AJ: It's council property, it's Fladbury Crescent and it's in Gibbins Road. And it's right opposite the main gates of Selly Old Park.

Why did you move in the 1960s?

AJ: It would have been 1960 because I was 15. But there was a lot of grief when people had to leave because nobody wanted to go.

PC: Because it was a good community. It really was a good community

Did they demolish them?

AJ: Yes they pulled them down, but either side of the prefabs were allotments, and they got sold and they built private houses on. I'm not sure who owns that land, whether it was council. But it was council built, the ones where the prefabs were. And loads more then, not just the prefabs, it was bit overcrowded. I'm not saying that they're not happy there. But it's not quite the same.

PC: During the school holiday we were always over the park.

AJ: Well, we were told to go to the park.

PC: But we're always over the park, and we come back because we could see the clock.

AJ: The university clock you could see.



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PC: And then we'd just come back, it was just a lovely childhood.

AJ: No phones.

PC: No phones, no watches.

AJ: You'd have to walk up Gibbins Road to Strathdein Road to use a phone.

PC: And we always checked the university clock.

And if we were going to have rain we could smell Cadbury's chocolate. So you'd get your washing in if you could smell chocolate. That's not a bad thing to have in anyone's childhood.

Have you got a funny story to tell, a funny memory linked to the prefab?

AJ: Well I can remember frightening you in the prefabs. I don't know whether that is funny.

PC: More than once, more than once.

AJ: I'd go in, there is a built-in wardrobe and I'd hide behind that and as she walked in I'd put my hand on her shoulder.

PC: Mind you, mum did buy me a toilet brush and we used to have hedgehogs in the garden, so I'd put it down Andree's bed and brush it upwards. I got into bed first, let Andre come in get in bed turn the light off, she got a hedgehog in her bed!

AJ: That's not very nice.

You were talking about the silverfish?

AJ: There was silverfish, they were always in the bathroom, in the bath itself, about that big. I still see them around, generally old places, I think it's connected with damp or rotten wood.

PC: Certainly with damp.

AJ: You'd see them in the bath, and I'd never seen anything like that until we moved in.

PC: But it was a happy time in the prefab.

AJ: It was happy for us as a family.



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PC: It was a good environment.

When you went to school, did other children who didn't live in prefabs look a bit down on you?

PC: No.

AJ: Because we went to school with the people were in the prefabs. I don't think we ever experienced anything like that.

PC: You'd have people sort of say, you live in a matchbox when you went to bigger school, but it was said jokingly.

AJ: I think we saw ourselves on a level playing field all the way through.

Would you live in a prefab again?

PC: Oh yes, in a heartbeat, yes I would.

AJ: I wouldn't have wanted one when the children were really young, I'd have wanted a bit more space. But now I'm getting older.

They are ideal really because no stairs, light, they're well designed.

PC: Easy to decorate, to keep clean.

AJ: By the side of us, we were on the bottom side of the pudding basin weren't we, there was Ellis's sports field at the back, and they used to play cricket, didn't they try and get on the roof to try and watch the cricket, didn't dad try to get on the roof because they could get a better view. And also mum used to throw bread up on the roof, for the seagulls, you could hear them on the roof.

And there was the other thing with the milkman, when it was snowing and the birds coming in and pecking because the milk was left outside, and the cream would lift because it was all frozen. And the birds would come and peck at the cream. And the gypsies coming round, coming round selling, and aunt Margery at the back of us, she was afraid and used to go lie under the bed when they were there. We couldn't understand.

What were they selling?

AJ: Pegs.

PC: And we had the rag and bone man.

AJ: Not many cars.



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No shop in the prefab?

AJ: No shops, I look back now and I realise that we didn't have a car. So you'd have to walk everywhere.

PC: There was no bus up the road.

And you had no brother?

AJ: No, no.