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Barbara Brewer, Peckham

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St Marks Hall, Excalibur Estate

Interview by Sonia Zhuravlyova with Barbara Brewer

Transcribed by Sonia Zhuravlyova March 2018

Sonia: You grew up in a prefab, in Peckham. Was it just one house or a big estate?

Barbara: No it wasn't a big estate, it was like a crossroads, two of the corners were bomb damaged, they built on the other two corners. There were four prefabs each side of the road. Ours backed onto the railway. And I still remember: it was number 101 and I moved there when I was six, in 1946 and we were there 10 years. And it was lovely. The garden went all the way round. And my brother and I had a lot of fun there, we used to wave to people on the trains going by, they were steam trains then. And it was really nice, they had a built-in cooker and fridge, and the kitchen table came down out off the wall so all you needed in the kitchen was chairs. Lot of floor space where the table went into the wall.

Where did your parents live before?

Well, when I was a baby, we lived in Conisborough Crescent, which is off the Bromley Road. But then we got bombed from there, so we went back to live in Peckham where my nan lived, but my dad was doing war work so we had to go to Nottingham for about five or six years, so when we got back we were homeless, so we were offered a prefab, and I remember my mum, they were putting the just the foundation down, and she told me she could choose the one she wanted and she choose the one that had the biggest garden, it went off like a triangle. It was built on the site that had been an off-licence and a pub, so the garden was full of pieces of coloured glass and china, and as a little girl of six I thought that was wonderful, I collected it. And later on my dad put a lot of it in to a bit path he made, all the bits of china, different colours.



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Do you remember, were your parents happy to live in a prefab or were they worried?

They loved it but, my brother and me, there were only two bedrooms, and we wanted our own bedrooms, so we kept on about it, so we moved when I was sixteen and my brother was twelve. And we went to a flat from there, but we really missed the prefab then. But you know, we had a lot of fun there growing up. But I remember my mum being quite annoyed, because a few years after that I wasn't married, she said I could have stayed there, because she loved it was detached no neighbours. And it was really nice as I remember it.

Do you remember what mother liked about the prefab the most?

Well it was very modern at the time, and it had lots of built-in cupboards, even in the bathroom there was little medicine cupboard high up, stuff like that. Separate bathroom and toilet. In the hallway was an airing cupboard. The cooker and the fridge were built in. They were a funny sort of green colour at the time but it was modern then. And the front room had like a fire with doors on it that you opened, and it had a round hearth, and you know, if you shut the doors on it it kept the room warm, and if you wanted it open, you'd feel cosy.

Prefabs were cold in the winter, and hot in the summer, did you have that as well?

We had that, yes we didn't mind too much, we were used to it. No central heating of course, nothing like that.

But hot water when you wanted it?

Oh yes, it had immersion heater where you put money in for hot water. Not sure if it came from the fire as well when that was on, it might have done. In the summer or if you didn't have the fire on, you could get the hot water that way. It was really good at the time, we felt lucky, we loved it there.

Do you remember what kind of prefab it was?

Yes, the one with the front door sort of on the corner, not in the middle.

So is it like that one, the green one?



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Yes it was that style.

It is like the prefabs here on this estate. Which is the Uni Secos, well I think they had different kinds, one with door in the centre in the middle, and one with the door on the side.

Yes, I had a friend that had one with the door in the middle. But we had one like that, when you went in the front door you were in the hallway, the toilet facing you and bathroom over there as well, separate. Then you went into the living room. And one bedroom went off that and the kitchen was there; the kitchen had a door with windows in it and my mum made pretty little curtains for that. Our bedroom, my brother and me was off of the kitchen, quite nice.

I know people were very house proud, really took care of their homes.

Oh, yes you did you loved it, there was a shed in our garden.

Was it like an Anderson shelter or was it just a shed?

No, just a shed that was built when the prefab was, after the war. And I remember my mum had a big mangle in there, you didn't have any washing machine. I used to help her with that. It was great, it was lovely.

Do you know what happened to the prefabs when you left?

I didn't go back there for years when we left. And then, when I met my husband he wanted to have a look at it, so we went round there and it was so sad, it was all boarded up, ready to be pulled down. But that must have been about 10 years later. We were there 10 years.

So if you moved in 1946, you stayed until 1956?

That's right.

So in the 1960s it was still there?

Yes, it would have been perhaps the 1970s, but they ready to be pulled down. I don't know what they built there. I never went back there. It was great.



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Must have been a nice place to spend your childhood?

It was even though it was Peckham, which is not so nice now. I remember on the crossroads, because there wasn't much traffic about, you would hear a bell ring, and my mum used to say, they'd come round with a horse and cart, she used to say, 'Go and see what they're selling, it might be strawberries from the fields or cherries,' because she used to make a lot of jam, and bottle it, bottle fruit an' that and sometimes it would be crumpets. On a Sunday, it might be shrimps and winkles, seafood.

What did you do with your garden, did you have flowers?

Well my dad grew some vegetables, he had a patch of grass, a place to sit with rose bushes. He made a path all round so my brother and I could ride our bikes and we had a scooter. At the end of the garden he grew vegetables and there were some fruit bushes as well.

What did he grow, potatoes?

Yes potatoes and salad and stuff.

Do you remember the neighbours who lived in normal houses, did you have any interaction with them?

Not really, because there was a railway bridge, then there was the crossroads. We knew everybody in the eight prefabs and a lot of it was bomb damage, there wasn't any houses, not a lot of houses actually that near. Two children in each of them, most of them, except for two were the same sex, two boys, two girls but we were all really happy there. A little church opposite and we went to Sunday school. It was really nice.

Have you been on this estate before, have you seen the prefabs?

I never saw them, I lived on Downham Way for 30 years, but never came down this way much, unless I was on a bus just going to Catford. I've never been to this church, I go to St John Church, which is nearer to me on the Bromley Road. I was there yesterday cos it's their 90-year celebration of the start of the Downham estate so there was an exhibition there, and I was talking about it to the lady because she had a picture of prefabs there and I was telling her about it, she said why don't you go to St Marks tomorrow.



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And what was your father's job?

I don't really know, something to do with making things. Something to do with the war.

And when he came back?

He was an engineer, so he just, he worked in Barking for years. He travelled to work.

And your mother?

She stayed at home until we were grown up, then she got some part-time work.

She must have missed the prefab?

Yes she did, she always spoke about it. You know, no bother with the neighbours or anything like that, hardly any cars about at that time. I remember at the Queen's coronation in 1953, we got a television just for that really, and nobody else had one. So everybody came round, neighbours and the family, to watch the coronation on the telly all day, I remember her making tea and sandwiches. But you had to draw the curtains when you watched the telly.

I was reading about a women's voluntary service. And then, because a lot of the prefabs like yours were built on bomb sites so people's gardens did not have much there, and this women's voluntary service donated the plants and encouraged people to grow...

Yes... And if you outgrew some clothes.. My mum was very good at making things, like knitting and dresses and school uniforms, she made all my things like my school blazer.