



Ray Smith, Penarth

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

**Prm0005102\_Ray\_Smith\_Penarth2017.mp3**

**24/6/17**

**London Festival of Architecture, St Marks Hall, Excalibur Estate**

Interview by Elisabeth Blanchet with Ray Smith

Transcribed by Sonia Zhuravlyova March 2018

***Elisabeth: Briefly introduce yourself?***

Yes, my name is Ray Smith, I live in Wandsworth now, I lived in London since 1949. When we moved from our prefab, up here, because my father was looking for work after the war.

***So you grew up in the prefab, a few years?***

Yes, we moved into the prefab sometime in 1946, this was in a small town just outside Cardiff, called Penarth. And the estate was about 20, perhaps 30 prefabs. They were Acorn 5s, as you told me. We moved in sometime in 1946, and we were there till 1949, my sister was born there. Prior to that we lived with my grandparents, then when my father got back from the war we were rehoused into the prefab estate, which was brand new then. We lived there through the winter of 1946/1947, and sometimes the snow was nearly over the top, the way it drifted it was nearly over the top. When I was going to school it was downhill all the way to the school and then back up again...

***How old were you in 1946?***

I would have been about 7 then, I was born in 1939, so I would have been about 7 or 8. Because must have been 1946 when we moved in.

***The winter of 1946 was really a terrible one. So do you know why your father got a prefab?***

Well it was probably because he was an ex-serviceman, and come back from the war, but he came back from the war late, because he was in the Far East and of course they came home by boat, which took three months or something like that. He didn't get back until some time 1946.

***There was someone on the estate here, Eddie, remember who came back from Burma...***



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My father was in Burma.

***Voila!***

That's why he didn't get back until sometime in 1946. When he came back we were rehoused into this new estate of prefabs, which was absolutely wonderful to us. We'd never had, where I lived with my grandparents we had an outside toilet, no bathroom. So we moved into the prefab, an Arcon, which had everything.

***Do you have a memory when you first went to the prefab?***

Yes I do, my mother must have gone ahead of me, and I followed on and when I got there I realised I didn't know which number it was, luckily I found the right one. When I got there, and I can remember distinctly arriving on the estate, and thinking to myself I don't know what number it was, which one is ours! But I managed to find it. It had everything that we didn't have. I don't remember it having a fridge, but it must have done. I remember saying to somebody about the hot water, how wonderful the hot water was. Saying to somebody, 'The water's hot enough but it's not hot enough to make tea!'

***So you were in one of the bedrooms by yourself before your sister?***

I was.

***And then your sister was...***

When my sister come, I don't remember how it was worked out when my sister was there but I expect she was in with my mother, by that time she was born my father had moved to London for work. Then in January 1949 as a family we moved to London. We lived in Brixton then.

***But not in a prefab though?***

No, but what I showed you on that piece of paper, Moston Road. we lived close to that in Brixton. But that site now is church, there was an original church there, a Methodist church but it got pulled down when it was all redeveloped, it's all flats now. The site where we lived in Penarth, that's now all low-rise blocks of flats, but the actual road sequence is exactly the same. In fact where we were, right next to us was a field and twice a day the local farmer would bring his cattle past the prefab into the field and bring them out again for milking later in the day. But that area now, there is a big secondary modern school there now. And what was the fields is now a big playground for the school.

***Do you remember your mother talking about the prefab, did she like the prefab?***



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I am sure she did, I don't recall her ever saying anything about it but I am sure she did like it. Coming from sharing a small terraced house with grandparents and my mother's two unmarried sisters, well they were unmarried at the time, as well they were there and I suppose it was a bit cramped. And I remember being there and being given a pomegranate and eating pomegranate seeds with a pin.

***In the prefab?***

No, no in the grandparents' house.

***About the community, it was an estate of 20 prefabs...***

Twenty, 30 or so, I don't know the precise number but it must have been something like that.

***Do you remember if there was...***

There were young children of my age. They probably all moved from similar environments into the prefabs. When their parents, their fathers came back from the war. So there were a lot of children there. And I remember one of the prefabs caught fire, and was absolutely gutted. Totally destroyed.

***And nobody died?***

Oh, no, nobody died. Luckily nobody died. But I remember watching it blazing away.

***Do you have friends on the estate?***

I did have friends on there yeah, because basically we went to the same school.

***Did the other kids in the school look a bit down on you and the prefabs?***

No I don't think they looked down on us. But I remember someone remarking, because the estate was called Redlands Avenue at the time nobody lived in an avenue, I remember, I don't remember distinctly, I remember someone scoffing, 'Oh you live in an avenue!' But of course but it was a prefab estate, which was wonderful. I think the site before that must have been a military site because there was nearby a Nissen hut, so I imagine that there might have been a military site or gun site or something, the town Penarth had its own docks and across the other side was Cardiff docks, so we did get bombed. So I imagine maybe it was a gun site or something there or even a barrage building site.

***Yes because they were building prefabs on all sorts...***



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So there was probably a certain amount of infrastructure there already, gas and electricity mains. I imagine that was there already so that's why the site was chosen.

***Do you know when they were demolished?***

No I don't. I would say probably in the 1960s, but it's difficult to say with these low-rise flats because you can't always pinpoint when they were built. They couldn't have been there much more than 10, 15 years after that, which was their lifespan anyway.

***Do you have a funny story to say about the prefab or something you remember?***

You know the Crittal windows that used to open out, and you put a stay down so it stayed up I remember running around the house and smashing at this window. And I can remember too, if I came home or was out and my mother was out, we could open the windows quite easily and open the top window and put your arm in and open and get in. So they weren't very secure the windows weren't very secure. But I don't remember anybody being robbed or burgled. It might have happened but I don't know about it.

***Did you have a street parties?***

No we already had the street parties before we moved in. We had a VE Day street party, like they happened everywhere, in the street where I lived with my grandmother. I've got a photograph of it. And I remember before we moved into the prefab, towards the end of the war, the American soldiers being there.

***In Penarth?***

Yes. I remember when I went into hospital, when I was discharged they didn't take me home in an ambulance, they came out in an American army jeep, because it was the only vehicle to get through the snow. This must have been 1945 before the American troops went away.