

THE PREFAB POST

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FREE

“WE ALL LOVED IT”

George Warren and his sister Olive Welfare recall a happy childhood in a Uni-Seco prefab on the Isle of Dogs

Olive: We moved in it was 1945. My mum was bombed out of Stewart Street, she went to live in Dagenham with her sister-in-law because there was no housing. She used to come up to London every week to the housing office and they used to say, “No Mrs Warren, when we have something for you we will let you know.” Then one Friday, when she got home, there was a letter, she got this prefab. She was very pleased because her whole family ended up living on the same street. I was just a baby when mum was bombed from Stewart Street. I was five when we came back and I started school here.

George: I think that the whole family were bombed out and as you know, prefabs were going up as emergency housing, and it just happened that all her family needed emergency housing and everyone ended up in the same place.

Olive: She loved it, we all did. I did notice that in the winter time things used to get a bit damp but in the summer the prefabs were really warm. The walls were very thin. We even had a sheet of ice on the windows... it used to look lovely! To move into a home

that already had a cooker, a cupboard with wire trays for your vegetables and a shelf for pots was unusual. The table folded up, which was lovely, until we got some new furniture. It had everything that was needed – lots of storage space. I know that in my mum’s bedroom there was a built-in basket for dirty linen and each bedroom had wardrobes.

George: It also had a copper in the kitchen where mum would boil the sheets... and made the Christmas pudding in there too!

Olive: To have a fridge so early on... you did feel quite privileged really. They were like bungalows, we were lucky really. An old aunt who came to the island from the East End, when she walked down our street she said, “It’s just like being on holiday!” Because everyone looked after their gardens, it was lovely our street. Our grandfather came to live with us, he just turned up one day and that was it. My mum’s sister lived a few prefabs down so I had to go down there to sleep as there wasn’t enough room, George and him shared the second bedroom. We had a coal fire back then, our grandad used to spit into it! Most times he was a good shot. But then we got an electric fire but grandad didn’t care!

Olive: When we were young, my dad was working in the dock, my mum didn’t go to work, but my mum’s sister had a nice home as she always worked. She was the first on the street to have a 9in television. When my dad had a bad accident in the dock, he got compensated. I was 15 at the time, in 1955. He got this money so we had a new three-

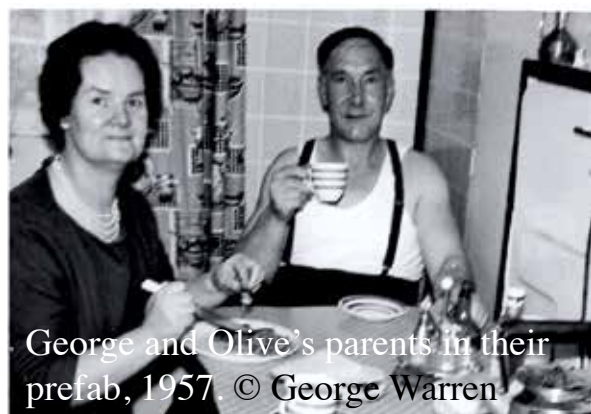


Wedding of the Barry family. Olive was the bridesmaid. © George Warren

piece, a television and a radiogram as they were called then. On our street there was a little row of shops and there were seven prefabs. We didn’t have a lot but everybody was in the same boat; you didn’t miss what you didn’t have but it was a happy childhood.

George: Dad liked to garden and round about September time they used to go get a little chick, then that would be our Christmas dinner. He grew carrots, potatoes, onions. He liked growing flowers too. Because the partition between the front room and the bedroom were cupboards, if anyone got married, that used to come out and you’d have a fair-sized room. You’d have your reception there. A wedding dinner then would have been mashed potato and ham. And it was all cooked in the kitchen.

Olive: When I got engaged my dad and my uncles took the partition down and we had trestle tables right through. All my cousins celebrated their weddings in the prefabs. Most people had pianos. You made your own entertainment back then.

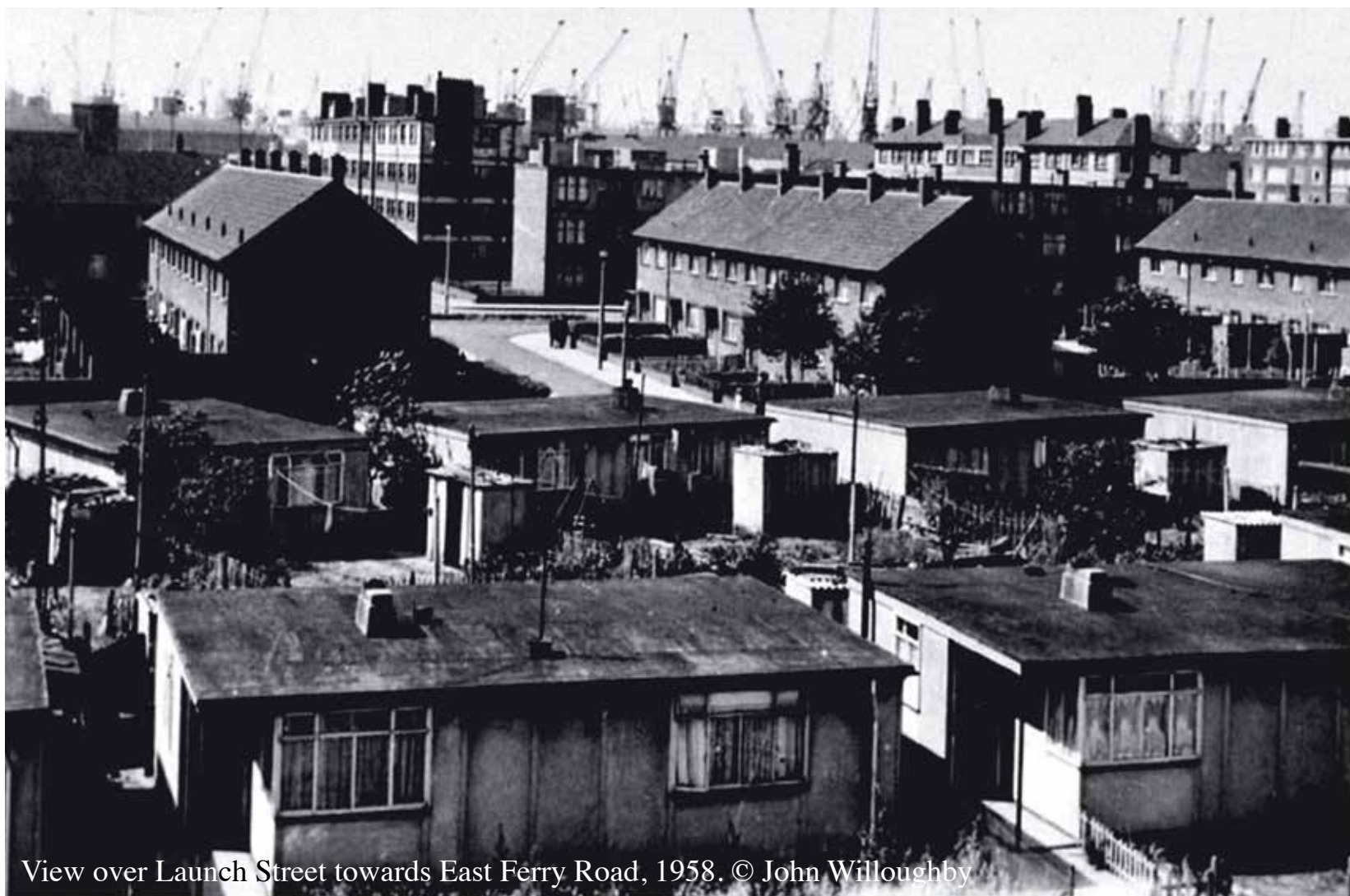


George and Olive’s parents in their prefab, 1957. © George Warren

Mick Lemmerman's history of Isle of Dogs prefabs

Built at the end of the Second World War in response to the housing crisis, and intended to be temporary, prefabricated houses – prefabs – were a familiar site on the Island until around 1970.

The whole of the west side of Stebondale Street, close to where I lived, was made up of empty prefabs by 1970, and I – like many kids – enjoyed a summer holiday spent smashing them up. I can still remember the smell of the asphalt roofs, the musty and dusty interiors, the ease with which we broke holes in the walls (brittle stuff, that asbestos, and we had no idea how dangerous it was), the shattered sinks and toilet pots.



View over Launch Street towards East Ferry Road, 1958. © John Willoughby

I don't recall any adults telling us not to do what we were doing. Nobody ever complained. The police never turned up to chase us off (except perhaps when asbestos was thrown onto a bonfire, causing a satisfying explosive crack when it reached a high enough temperature). The prefabs were not fenced off or secured in any way. They were just another part of the huge playground of derelict buildings that was the Island. But, once upon a time, these now-derelict buildings were much loved by hundreds of Island families.

The Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act of 1944 authorised the government to spend up to £150 million on temporary houses. Poplar Borough Council applied for 2,000 of these prefabs and, in September 1944, constructed three different types in Glengall Grove (now Tiller Road) for demonstration purposes. The selected prefab was of the Uni-Seco type, produced by the London-based Selection Engineering Company Ltd, and based on a military wartime office design.



Martin family on Galbraith Street enjoying their garden. © Irene Martin

A family moved into one of the demonstration Uni-Seco prefabs in Glengall Grove a month later, and the council started laying concrete bases for others before the end of the year. "The prefabricated panels were a sandwich with a wood-wool filling between sheets of corrugated asbestos-cement. The houses took eight unskilled men eight days to assemble. It sounds crude, but the construction industry learnt a lot about innovation and planning. There was no alternative. There was no time to set up brick factories. I often ask myself why we don't make similar buildings today for the homeless," wrote Dr Harold Rose, one of the designers of the Uni-Seco prefab.

There were different configurations: side or front entrance, with or without entrance canopy, bathroom and kitchen at back or at side, and so on. The prefabs were delivered as flat kits to be assembled on site, save for the kitchen/bathroom unit which was ready assembled. Built-in drawers and cupboards for storage were standard, as was a fitted kitchen. Crude by today's standards, but nevertheless they had a gas hob, oven and refrigerator. Poplar Borough Council gave priority prefab residence to families made homeless by the war and living in unsatisfactory conditions. They set the rent at 9s 3d, increasing it to between 12s 3d and 12s 9d in 1953.

There were three areas of prefabs on the Island in 1950: in North Millwall, around Stebondale Street, and – by far the largest – the Glengall/Samuda area.

Peter Wright spent a significant part of his childhood in a prefab in Tooke Street and remembers it fondly.

“Our prefab was built on the bomb site that resulted when a massive parachute mine dropped on Tooke Street on 7th September 1940, destroying The Islanders Pub and surrounding houses. Four prefabs were built in Tooke Street... ours being no 4, next to no 2 just behind Betts Butchers and two more on the other side of the road next to where the pub stood.

Coming from an old upstairs dingy roomed Victorian terraced house to a fairly new prefab in 1955... a nice sized bedroom, bathroom and toilet was quite something. Light, airy and fresh new home... gone were the dark passages, staircases and the old tin bath. In through your own front door, and a nice wide garden.”



George Warren's cousin and her husband on Galbraith Street.
© George Warren



George Johnson on Atworth Street, 1958. © George Warren

In 1952 the first of the borough's prefabs was demolished.

Although the borough intended to demolish them all as soon as possible and rehouse tenants in new homes, economic challenges led to a slowdown in council house building, and by 1965 there were still 323 prefabs in the borough.

However, the prefabs proved themselves not all able to withstand the ravages of time. Peter Wright reports:

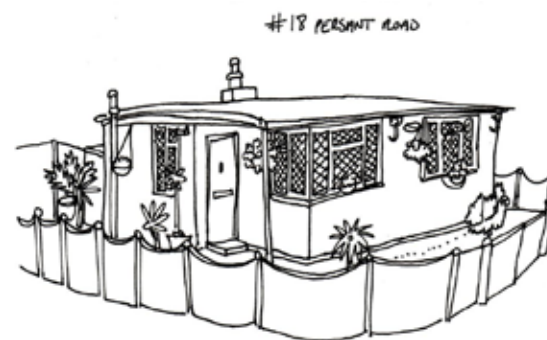
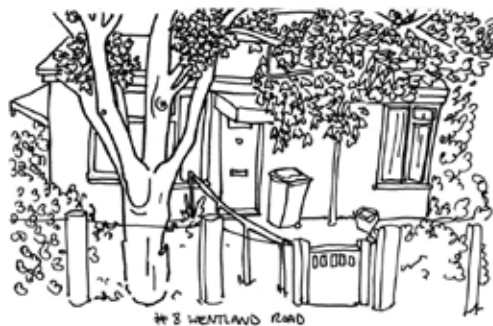
“Towards the end of our time there in 1964 the walls became damp, so much that outside vegetation had reached the inside walls and was sprouting up behind the wallpaper.”

Stories of the damp, rat-infested prefabs in Stebondale Street appeared in the East London Advertiser in the late 1960s, and action to demolish the prefabs in Poplar was increased. All such prefabs in Poplar were gone by 1977, 33 years after the first ones were constructed.



The last few prefabs on Glengarnock Avenue, 1966. © Island History Trust Collection

GET CREATIVE FOR THE PREFAB POST !



Drawings courtesy of © Harriet McDougall

If you lived in a prefab or have always found the homes and their history fascinating, why not get creative and draw a picture, write down your memories or even a short story or poem about life in the prefabs?

Send your entry to prefabmuseum@gmail.com, marked 'get creative' in the subject line, and we'll publish your submission in the next issue of the Prefab Post. Don't forget to include your name and contact details in the email.

The best entries will get a prize of a prefab tote bag and four postcards.

ALL SUMMER LONG 2016:

MOVING PREFAB MUSEUM, EXPLORATION AND ARCHIVE

Starting on 21st May 2016 with an archive tea party and walk on The Excalibur Estate in London, the Moving Prefab Museum has been on the road to various locations in the Midlands and south east England. In between we have been exploring prefab locations, visiting archives, interviewing prefab residents and making some exciting discoveries to add to our archive and map.

We travelled to Wake Green Road in Birmingham to visit the listed Phoenix prefabs with the Birmingham Conservation Trust and 20th Century Society West Midlands. We were invited to the Airfield Research Group archive in Alconbury, near Huntingdon. We not only found lots of prefab information at the archive but found some still lived in, in Cambridgeshire, including Swedish prefabs and Hawksley BL8s. Later in the month we were at the East End Canal Festival in Mile End Park, where prefabs once stood.

In July we were at the Rural Life Centre in Farnham, Surrey and the Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire for our launch weekend. In August we held a training day for oral historians in the Isle of Dogs, London. Three days later two of the trainee oral historians came with us to Chalfont St Giles in Buckinghamshire to the Chiltern Open Air Museum and bagged their first interview! At all our events, visitors wanted to share memories and photos with us.

We interviewed John who has lived in his Brockley prefab since 1948, June and Jaroslav in Ipswich, and Terence who used to live in a prefab in Gospel Oak.

September is another busy month, with Wake Green Road open weekend, archive training and a late summer event in the Isle of Dogs with The Friends of the Island History Trust.

MOVING PREFAB MUSEUM AND ARCHIVE

The Prefab Museum has been awarded support from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the project The Moving Prefab Museum and Archive, from May 2016 to November 2017.

This exciting project will bring the Prefab Museum to venues and museums across the UK where we will share our prefab knowledge, record and collect stories, photos and memories. Over the course of the project we will publish these collected memories through The Prefab Post our regular newsletter, our website and social media, bringing them together to create a national archive.

Our prefab location map started life at the museum. We carefully mapped the prefabs people told us about in the visitors' book and from the flags stuck in our map on to Google My Map. As part of our project the Moving Prefab Museum and Archive we aim to make the map even better, with more stories, photos and links.

If you are interested in being involved in this project there are lots of opportunities, from volunteering at events, training in archives and oral history, to seeking out prefabs past and present in your area, to telling us about your prefab, where it was and your memories of it. Join our mailing list on prefabmuseum@gmail.com to receive regular updates or look on our website and social media for our events.

www.prefabmuseum.uk

www.facebook.com/PalacesForThePeople/

www.twitter.com/Prefabs_UK



THE PREFAB POST

With thanks to George Warren, Olive Welfare, Mick Lemmerman, Harriet McDougall, Keara Stewart, Selim Korycki and Sonia Zhuravlyova.

The Prefab Post is printed with the help of the Heritage Lottery Fund.

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/