



THE PREFAB POST

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Free



© Selim Korycki

The Wake Green Road Prefabs

The Wake Green Road prefabs in Moseley, Birmingham, still stand proud more than 70 years since they were built as a temporary solution to Britain's post-war housing problems.

Between 1944 and 1949, more than 156,000 two-bedroom temporary bungalows rose across the UK under the Temporary Housing Programme. More than 4,000 were in Birmingham: although they have been well loved by the people who lived in them, most have been pulled down.

All the bungalows had a minimum 635 sq ft floor space and were assembled from prebuilt panels attached to prefabricated wood or metal frames. The Wake Green Road houses are the Phoenix type – detached, three-bay, steel-framed and clad in corrugated asbestos sheeting with metal windows.

All prefabs came with a central service unit of a prefabricated kitchen built onto a bathroom and indoor lavatory with central service pipes and a coal fire and back boiler to fuel hot water and a hot air central heating system. The kitchens contained the latest labour-saving equipment and were luxurious for the time.

The Birmingham prefabs were listed Grade II in 1998 as “an unusual surviving example”. Birmingham Conservation Trust, the Twentieth Century Society in the West Midlands and the Prefab Museum are working on the Prefabulous project to conserve the bungalows, several of which are empty and in poor repair.

Lou Robson, October 2016

Back in September, Birmingham Conservation Trust was privileged to be able to work with the Moving Prefab Museum as part of Birmingham Heritage Week.

The Wake Green Road prefabs had been on the Trust's radar for a while and with Lou Robson's in-depth conservation plan throwing more light onto the buildings' history, it seemed a shame that the public weren't able to enjoy visiting this special slice of Birmingham's social history.

The prefabs (a row of 17 of which 16 have listed building status) are currently mainly under the ownership of Birmingham City Council who still rent out ten of the properties. Thanks to Tom Taplin of BCC, we were able to open up two of the vacant properties for two days over the Heritage Week period. While it was disappointing not to be able to allow public access to the property with the most original features, the two we could use still retained a number of the original features and still gave the feeling of stepping back in time.

The Moving Prefab Museum and Lou Robson, from the Twentieth Century Society, provided displays about prefabs past and BCT showed the present state of the prefabs as well as detailing the plans for the future.

Interest in the project was overwhelming with far more people enquiring about free tickets than we had to offer. In the end more than 120 people visited the bungalows, many of whom had lived in prefabs themselves as children. The days really helped to raise the profile of the prefabs but the Birmingham Conservation Trust and everyone who replied to the follow up survey said they were very likely to now tell others about the Moving Prefab Museum.

There was great support for the Trust's proposals to take on the six vacant buildings and turn four of them into 1940s holiday lets and a prefab museum space. Birmingham Conservation Trust is currently looking for a new director to take the project onward and we hope to be able to report back on how the project is progressing in subsequent editions.

Vicki Cox, Birmingham Conservation Trust



The Wake Green Road prefabs, June 2016.
© Elisabeth Blanchet

Memories from Murrayfield Avenue prefab estate by Christine Antonini (nee Fenemore)

By modern-day standards Murrayfield Avenue wasn't a large estate – it was in the “country”. West Heath at the time was a small village, in fact across the road at the top of the avenue it was mostly fields complete with a retired cart horse called Boxer. Close by was West Heath sanatorium.

The avenue was just one road, flat at the top and sloping into a circle at the bottom. Only the prefabs either side of the road had vehicle access, the rest of the houses were reached by pathways.

We moved into the prefab in 1950 when I was four years old. The first thing I remember was my mother's anger at the overflowing metal dustbin left in the front garden and sitting on the top was an empty blue salmon tin with a picture of a woman in a hat with a feather.



Murrayfield prefabs circa 1960/61.
In the background are the shops of The Fordrough.
© Mal Hinton (nee Dovey)

We had only been in the prefab for a short time when one Saturday lunchtime the back door flew open and in walked a priest who just sat down at the table and looked at Mum. After the initial shock she asked him what he wanted. “I always come here for Saturday lunch once a month,” he said. “Not this month you don't,” replied Mum. “Well I'm here now,” he said. “We are not Catholic and my husband will be home for his lunch anytime now,” replied Mum. Without another word he got up and left. We later found out that the previous people didn't tell him they were leaving because they didn't want him to know where they were moving to! I remember this so well and years later we still laugh about it.

As an only child I invented many games. My favourite for quite a while was “moving into the bathroom”. My mum dreaded it. The first time had caused a few problems, firstly a key was in the door and I locked it. Secondly Mum needed to use the toilet, how she dealt with that I don't know – but she was quite inventive! After locking myself in I found I couldn't unlock it so it was my turn to bang on the door. Under instructions I managed to open the window and Mum climbed in. Thereafter the key was removed from the door! I still played this game, putting the eiderdown and pillow into the bath to make a bed, a doll's pram moved in and dolls bathed in the sink. The minute I asked for a jam jar and went into the garden to pick flowers to put on the table – the toilet seat – Mum made a dash for the bathroom!

For the children living in the circle this was the playground, with marbles, “what's the time”, “golden river” and “famous initials” as well as skipping and scooter races downhill.

An overgrown small field – probably too hilly to build on – became an adventure play area complete with a tree that was hanging over a small brook as well as lots of places to hide. Cowboys and Indians as well as hide and seek were played here. Traps were laid by tying tufts of grass together as trips. It was known as “fairyland”, I don't think anybody knew why!



Children outside their
Murrayfield Avenue prefab.
© Mal Hinton (nee Dovey)

In 1953 it was the Coronation. This was celebrated by most on the avenue and a lot of preparation must have gone into it. It was held at the pavilion in the sports field on Rednal Road.

I don't remember the order of events but I think it all started early afternoon with a children's fancy dress parade (I went as a Victorian paper seller). This was followed by a fathers' fancy dress football match. The mums organised the children's tea party in the pavilion and I think there were some games and races. After tea we went home until early evening when the flat part of the avenue close to Rednal Road became the dance floor for the grown-ups. As it became dark we enjoyed fireworks, which was a great surprise.

It was quite sad when the council decided to pull the prefabs down. People started moving out in 1957, though nobody wanted to go because there was a good community spirit. It had been a safe and happy environment to grow up in. This was the start of massive changes at West Heath, Murrayfield Avenue and the fields around were replaced by Birmingham overspill estates.



Christine's friends outside their prefab.
© Mal Hinton (nee Dovey)

American prefabs

The Lend-Lease arrangement with the US government was announced in February 1945 and the first American prefabs arrived in late May/early June. The priority was to place them on bomb sites in London. However due to sites not being ready to receive them, they were distributed to prepared sites across the country, including Birmingham, Plymouth and other cities that had suffered devastation. Although the UK government initially agreed to the offer of 30,000 American prefabs this was reduced to 8,000 later in 1945, as UK manufacturers geared up for production.



Images © Andree Jones and Pat Cutler

Andree Jones and Pat Cutler visited our Moving Prefab at Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire on 23rd July 2016. They brought along photos of their family's American prefab at 21 Gatley Grove, Selly Oak, which they moved into in 1951 at the ages of 5 and 6. Andree and Pat's dad worked for Austin Motors, and their mum was the first in their family to move to the south side of Birmingham.



Images © Sue Watson

Sue Watson shared photographs of her grandmother's American prefab in Fox Hollies Road, Acocks Green. Her grandparents' names were Samuel and Elsie Knight. She told us that originally on the site was Colonel Walker's estate, he stipulated in his will that the gates must be left and they are still there today. There were 28 American prefabs on Fox Hollies Road, in two groups.



NEWS UPDATE NOVEMBER 2016:

MOVING PREFAB MUSEUM, EXPLORATION AND ARCHIVE

We really enjoyed the Wake Green Road open weekend in mid-September as part of Birmingham Heritage Week. Having the opportunity to be in an empty prefab again was great and we had the chance to arrange the rooms the way we wanted with our different displays – our participation board allowed visitors to write down prefab locations and fond memories too. We transformed the back room into a mini-studio where we interviewed ex-prefab residents and even found the time to go and visit Margaret and Roy who live in two prefabs on Wake Green Road. They allowed us to film them at home and told us a lot about their prefab life and more! Read more about the Wake Green prefabs in this issue from our partners the Birmingham Conservation Trust and 20th Century Society West Midlands.

The following week we were busy again with archive training and an event with the Friends of the Island History Trust at St John's Community Centre in the Isle of Dogs, London. Everyone who attended the event appreciated the first issue of the Prefab Post that was all about the Isle of Dogs!

The archive training, delivered by Sarah and Catherine from Holne Chase Heritage Resource Centre, was very beneficial to all of us and since then we have been working on the classification to develop the catalogue. We held an archive workshop on 12 November to sort through what we have received and talk about next steps. Next year you will be able to access the archive online, all the prefab stories, photos and oral histories we have collected over a period of 15 years.

Jane gave talks to various groups at the Friends of the Island History Trust Open Day, Barking and District Historical Society, Bocking Belles near Braintree, and Hainault Library. We had some good follow-ups including photos of the Hainault prefab estates and memories of prefabs on Wanstead Flats.

Our final event for 2016 was at Lower Clapton Stories at the beautiful Round House Chapel. Lower Clapton, in common with many London boroughs, was devastated by bombing and had lots of prefabs.

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 a 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 would like to be involved with our project, or join our mailing list to receive regular updates, please email us at prefabmuseum@gmail.com or contact us by commenting on our website or posting on social media.

In the New Year we will be in Birmingham, holding our second archive workshop at the Coffin Works on Wednesday 18th January 2017. The same evening we will deliver a talk at the Gunmakers' Arms, 93 Bath Street, Birmingham B4 6HG at 7pm. For further events in 2017 please check our website.

www.prefabmuseum.uk

www.facebook.com/PalacesForThePeople

www.twitter.com/Prefabs_UK

We wish you all a merry festive season and look forward to seeing or hearing from you in 2017!



THE PREFAB POST

With thanks to Lou Robson, Vicki Cox, Christine Antonini, Andree Jones, Pat Cutler, Sue Watson, Keara Stewart, Selim Korycki and Sonia Zhuravlyova.

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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