



THE PREFAB POST

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Issue 7

Free

Childhood in Shrewsbury's prefabs

The final issue of The Prefab Post looks back on happy childhoods spent in post-war prefabs.

Here, Peter Ford recalls his early years spent in a cosy home – and the games he played.

I was born in a prefab at 48 Abbots Gardens, Shrewsbury, in 1951 and lived there until our family moved to a new house, built by my dad, Joe, in 1960. The new house was much bigger and in a nicer part of town but I have always looked back on number 48 with affection and longing.

Our house was one of a collection of detached, prefabricated bungalow houses, or “prefabs” as they were popularly called, built to help solve the post-war housing crisis as the returning heroes looked to establish their new war-wives and families. Apart from the small development, of which Abbots Gardens was part, I don’t recall any more of these single-storey prefabs in Shrewsbury. There were semi-detached two-storey prefabricated homes, “the steel houses”, half a mile away, off Crowmere Road. But the 40 or so prefabs stood in relative isolation among the ocean of pre-war, brick-built traditional council houses that dominated the Monkmoor area of town.

The prefabs themselves were all, of course, built to a standard rectangular format so that they could be factory manufactured cheaply and assembled on site. The prefabs had no garages, presumably deemed either unnecessary or unnecessarily expensive, so any cars or vans, and there weren’t many, were parked on the grass strip at the front. In our case, Dad’s ancient, three-wheeler Reliant van with its protruding, spoked front wheel stood in front of the house when he returned from work. On cold winter mornings, when even the starter handle couldn’t spark the Reliant to life, my sisters, Ursula and Mel, and I had the mortifying task of pushing the van off the grass patch and down the road to get it going.



Peter Ford (middle front row) and pals.

The path to our front door bisected the front lawn and then ran around the front and then the right-hand side of the house to the back door, which faced on to the back garden. Just where the path turned that final corner stood our small shed, an old Anderson shelter, with its green corrugated roof. It was just high enough for me to climb up on from the top of the metal rubbish bin. The shed’s warm roof with the regular pattern of painted rivets at its peak provided both a helpful vantage point and refuge for a small boy. Sitting on the roof, facing forward, I looked out onto the road, turning left I could see Mrs Twoose’s house next door, just over the fence, and turning right I could look out over our wild back garden to the Goughs’ house and orderly garden on the other side, maybe catching a glimpse of the Randalls’, next door but one.

The playing possibilities were endless: football, marbles, climbing trees, particularly the larger one, using nails hammered into the trunk to help the smaller children scramble towards the lower branches. Cowboys and Indians, using the hedge as a hiding place from which to mount attacks on our rivals.

And then there was tick in all its forms. Ball tick was a particularly communal game sometimes attracting up to 20 children of varying ages, racing round the hedge and trees, ducking and diving to avoid the ball as it was hurled towards you, squealing and screaming in excitement. The numbers playing gradually dwindling towards dusk as parents called us in for the night, although I seem to remember parents often acquiescing to a plea of, “Please, just 10 more minutes!”

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It's difficult to imagine now just how strong a part Cowboys and Indians played in the culture of post-war Britain, particularly of its children, reinforced by the regular diet of Hollywood cowboy B-movies shown at the Granada. We were probably not capable of picking up on any subtle subtext, if there was any, in the films we saw, so the cowboys we played were almost invariably the heroes and the Indians the villains. Unless, of course, you ended up as the Indian yourself, in which case you tried to imbue your character with more bravery and nobility than the "cannon-fodder" they were generally portrayed as on film.



Peter, Mel and friends outside number 48.

Dressing up as well as the equipment, particularly guns and hats, helped to underpin the role play. Cheap plastic pistols and rifles could be had from Woolworths, of course, but they were likely to break within a week. What we really venerated, though, were the more substantial, almost replica, guns owned by some of the older boys. Richard Gough, the teenage son next door to us, had one and I can clearly remember the thrill when he let me hold that pistol with its chunky "bone" handle. The weight was so much more convincing than the light, fragile casing of a Woolies gun.

As evidence of the importance to me of Cowboys and Indians and the equipment that went with it, I offer a photograph of me taken in the prefab back garden on my fourth birthday, with my sisters and me perched astride an old rocking horse.



Peter Ford on his fourth birthday with his sisters.

A copy of the photo sits on the sideboard in my house now, a gift from my late sister, Ursula. Mel holds the rocking horse's head and her left hand rests on my right arm. Ursula is directly behind me, her right hand holding mine and helping me point a plastic gun straight at the camera. Both girls wear home-made print dresses. The backdrop is the prefab garden's five-foot high tangled mass of raspberry and blackberry bushes. Mel gazes steadily at the camera but Ursula and I both wear goofy, slightly embarrassed grins. I seem to be wearing pyjama trousers, suggesting an early morning photo before the girls left for school and, over a T-shirt, I am resplendent in a studded jerkin jacket, with faux leather cowboy fringing, and matching gun belt and holster. Perched on my head, tilted slightly backwards to show the brutal fringe of my haircut, sits a pointed cowboy hat, a light string secured to both sides of the brim and resting in a knot under my chin.

This was one of the happiest days of my life, not just because the present of a cowboy outfit was perfect but because I had a party too, the only one I can ever remember having. We started the party in the sunlit back garden using our kitchen table and chairs, carried out through the back door and decorated with sandwiches and cakes, some of them contributed by Mrs Twoose from next door who also helped look after us that day. When it started to pelt down with rain, as a thunder storm forced us indoors, tall, red-headed Mrs Twoose and Mum made sure that the children, the table and chairs and the food were carried as quickly as possible into the safety of the kitchen. Somehow, at least in recollection, this sudden change also seems perfect, as if starting out in the sunlight and open air and finishing in the cosy safety of the kitchen had always been part of the plan.

I don't have any memories of either my parents' bedroom or the bathroom but that's because that bedroom would have been off limits and because, for a 1950s child, bathrooms were functional rather than recreational. And, apart from using the toilet itself, visits were not frequent, for a weekly bath and for face and hands washes in the morning. I needed to be scrubbed clean more regularly than that, given the amount of time spent digging and crawling about in gardens and waste ground or playing football, but the kitchen sink would suffice for most routine operations.



Image left: Ursula with Aunt Cecily.

Image right: Peter picking fruit in the prefab's back garden.

The living room faced towards the Abbots Gardens and, through the two elm trees, out across Abbots Road. But despite the comparatively open vista, the living room seems a dark and quiet place in my memory. Not a dismal dark but a restful, muted light. That's because, if the weather was fine, winter or summer, we were expected to be out playing while it was light and not to trouble our parents except for rare refuelling stops. So the living room was a place for quiet play, cars on the patterned carpet, or for listening to the radio, which rested on an occasional table in the corner of the room.

The kitchen was the working hub of the prefab: the sink, the mangle, the cooker, the pantry, the kitchen table and chairs where all meals were eaten. Even without a fridge, how did we fit all that activity into such a small space? I think that was one of the great secrets of prefab and of life in the post-war years. The prefabs were designed to make the best use of the space and building resources available while, for many, providing a first taste of life with an inside toilet and bathroom. There was very limited space for storing anything we did not use regularly but equally, in those days, we did not have the masses of unused or under-used stuff that is so essential to us now – that we need to keep and store in cupboards, lofts and garages.

The focus then was on using what you had as much as possible. So, the kitchen table was the party table in the garden on my fourth birthday and the kitchen chairs doubled as car seats when we children travelled in the back of Dad's van. I am not saying life then was better, and I am sure that in many ways things were tougher and more difficult, but perhaps things were a little simpler and freer from "the tyranny of choice".

Text and images © Peter Ford

Children of the prefabs

Our readers share snaps of their happy childhoods in the prefabs.



From top right, going clockwise: Silver End, Essex © Margaret Gardner; Ilford, Essex © Richard Hale; Homerton, London © Peter Kurton; Mile End, London © Dave Bregula; Highgate, London © Terrence Flanagan; St. Mary Cray, Kent © Bob Sterry; Ilford, Essex © Martin Hawells; Blackheath, London © Brenda Anderson Browne; St. Mary Cray, Kent © Bob Sterry; Bishops Stortford, Hertfordshire © Jon Dudley.
Main picture: Homerton, London © Peter Kurton.



What's next for The Prefab Museum



The Prefab Post

This is the final issue of the Prefab Post. It focusses on the children who grew up in the prefabs and have such fond memories of their childhoods, which is evident from their photos. I would like to thank all the contributors that have made each issue so individual and interesting, and Sonia Zhuravlyova and Selim Korycki for doing such a fantastic job of editing and designing the issues together.

The Moving Prefab Museum and Archive Project

This has been a multi-faceted project that has encompassed filming and recording oral histories with past and present residents, scanning archive photographs and collecting memorabilia including stories and memories. It has also involved leading guided walks, organising and running heritage events at partner museums and organisations, running a website and an interactive map, sharing information on social media, training volunteers and 'prefab scouts' and attracting media attention to the project and to the fate of the prefabs. The communities that formed around the prefabs have rarely been documented and this project was the first concerted effort to do so.

The Prefab Museum is unique in its broad and inclusive approach to the subject of post-war prefabs and their inhabitants. The project attempted to reach as many people in the UK who would not be able to travel to a central point.

The project surpassed our expectations by attracting many more people to events and talks and sharing prefab locations, and their personal archive and memories than we expected. There has been an incredible amount of interest in the project and the Prefab Museum. The generous Heritage Lottery Fund grant enabled the Prefab Museum to widen its reach, explore new territory, collect and share information and inform interested visitors, none of which would have been possible without the grant.

The great success was our partnership with the Birmingham Conservation Trust and the 20th Century Society West Midlands to bring back the empty Grade II listed Phoenix prefabs on Wake Green Road, Moseley, into use. Two successful open weekends in 2016 and 2017 in the vacant prefabs and a scoping project funded by Historic England led to closer working with Birmingham City Council who own the prefabs. The council have now decided to restore and conserve the prefabs with the intention of re-letting them to tenants. It is a fantastic result that they will be homes again.

The Wake Green Road prefabs were nominated by the Prefab Museum for *Irreplaceable: A History of England in 100 Places* and the nomination was successful in the Homes and Gardens category alongside Windsor Castle and Blenheim Palace! A book will be published later this year.

Elisabeth Blanchet, founder of the Prefab Museum

Elisabeth Blanchet resigned from the Prefab Museum in February and will pursue her love of prefabs in France, where she lives. Elisabeth will be greatly missed and I hope you will join me in wishing her the best of luck for the future, and to thank her for all she has done to raise the profile of post-war prefabs and their residents to national attention.

What's next

The online archive catalogue has been developed by Communitysites and will launch in mid-March. There are approximately 500 records on it at present. If you have contributed archive material to the Prefab Museum and it's not there yet, it will be! Please keep contributing your photos and memories, and if you would like to help with the catalogue please get in touch by email: prefabmuseum@gmail.com

The Prefab Museum will continue to develop links, give talks and joint events, and keep on collecting and sharing information about post-war prefabs for the enjoyment and education of all who are interested in this important part of social history.

Thank you to the organisations who hosted the events, to all who attended them and the talks, the prefab scouts who told us about locations for the map and to the many people who contributed their photos and memories. It has been a wonderful and rewarding project.

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With thanks to Peter Ford, everyone who contributed with their archival photographs published in this issue,
Keara Stewart, Sonia Zhuravlyova, Selim Korycki.

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
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