

THE PREFAB POST

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A WONDERFUL CHILDHOOD IN THE EXCALIBUR ESTATE PREFABS

Brother and sister Alan Brine and Rosemary Roffey recall their idyllic childhoods in the 1950s and 1960s

“We lived at number 3 Meliot Road. Living in prefabs – it was a wonderful, wonderful life. There was a large gasworks at Bell Green, Sydenham and often a sulphurous smell would fill the air. At 7.30am and at 5pm you could hear the steam whistle for the start and end of work shifts at Gleniffer Laundry. Then as now the flight path to Heathrow ran east to west over the estate, and I, like most boys of my age, would find the flights overhead fascinating, more so in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the arrival of jet airliners the Comet, VC10 and Boeing 707s.

Our days seem to be spent running around the streets or on our bikes, both Rosemary and I learned to ride on the same old bike that Dad got for us, when we had finished with it, it was given to Mrs Walklet who lived in Persant Road. She had cherry trees in her front garden and when we went past her house, we were given handfuls of freshly picked cherries, well I was, Mrs Walklet would make a fuss of me. The bike would have been given to allow her daughter Mitzy to also learn to ride.



Rosemary & Alan, 1951

Because of the lack of motor traffic and the security we were free to roam all over the prefab estate. The game we played was 40/40, also known as Tin Tan Tommy, which was often played in Meliot Road and would involve all the kids we knew from Meliot and Ector Road. I and Terry Rich would climb on to the coal shed roof, then we graduated on to the prefab roof but we always seemed to be in trouble for this, but could not understand why all the concern. We had an RAF 12-man life raft that in the summer months was filled with water and used as a pool. The noise must have been horrendous as most of the estate would be in our garden playing in the pool. We also had a large mosquito net that we used as a tent in the garden, with sleepovers. Our garden faced out on to Wentland Road with only a 1 meter high chain-link fence that an adult could step over. Security was never an issue, although we could always get back indoors as the back door was always unlocked at night.

Rosemary was known as the little girl with the cat in a pram dressed as a baby. She would walk with the cat to the fish shop in Boundfield Road and the fishmonger would give her scraps for the cat.

We loved our lives of freedom. When we started school some of the kids would try to make fun of the ‘shanty town’ or ‘cardboard city kids’, but these were the children who did not know what it was like to have a refrigerator at home, and have ice-cold milk to drink, to have a separate bathroom and toilet. When I first visited a schoolmate’s flat I found that the odd-looking thing in their kitchen was a bath with the top over it.

In the winter months, it could be so cold in the prefabs with ice forming on inside of the window panes from the condensation. On Saturdays, if Dad did not go into work early, he made up a big roaring fire to warm the house, then made a lot of porridge for us and we sat round the fire to eat it. On Sundays, if the muffin man had been round, some crumpets were bought and Dad and only Dad would toast them in front of the open fire and then we would have them with lashings of melting butter.



Brine family at Rosemary's baptism, Catford 1948

Some people kept chickens, so we would occasionally get fresh eggs.

All families would help each other if someone had a problem. One time there were a series of burglaries and the pre-pay gas and electric meter coin boxes were broken open and the contents stolen (it was the tenants’ responsibility for any money in the box so it would have been a real hardship for most to make up the loss). So a number of dads formed a vigilante group to patrol round the streets to try ensure we were all kept safe.”



Uncle George Brine with Alan, Catford 1950

THE PEOPLE'S PALACES:

70 YEARS ON LONDON'S PREFABRICATED HOUSES ARE STILL HOME TO MANY



Overview of the Excalibur Estate, 2004

To tour the maze of 186 prefabs on the Excalibur Estate in Catford, south-east London, is to get a glimpse of the unique post-war attitude of make-do-and-mend. These humble, single-storey bungalows, with their hanging baskets and carefully tended gardens, were put up by German and Italian prisoners of war from 1945 to 1946.



Jim Blackender, 2009

Excalibur is the biggest prefab community in Britain and six of these unique little homes were granted Grade II listing by English Heritage in 2009, but the rest have now been marked for demolition and the land will be developed by Lewisham Council. "It's depressing to watch the estate fall into disrepair, it's been left to rot," says Jim Blackender, who finally moved out of his prefab in 2012 after giving up on his battle with the council.

"People were happy here – but that's progress, I suppose," sighs Ted Carter, aged 81, a retired radio and TV engineer, as he surveys the garden of the prefab where he has lived for the past 30 years. It's homes such as these that the photographer Elisabeth Blanchet has spent 11 years documenting for her archive of Britain's prefabs.

Prefabricated houses were put up across Britain as a temporary solution to the post-Second World War housing crisis and were meant to last no more than a decade. Yet for 70 years, thousands of families have continued to call them home. Dubbed 'palaces for the people', they offered not only cheap rent, but unheard-of luxury to men returning from the war and to their families, who had been bombed out of their homes during the Blitz and ended up in overcrowded houses with no electricity or plumbing.

Eddie O'Mahony, now aged 94, was one of the first to move into his prefab on this estate. After returning from Singapore in 1946, he wasn't convinced by the prefab but Ellen, his young wife, who was used to outdoor toilets and no hot water, was delighted by its mod cons: a fitted kitchen, an indoor bathroom, a fireplace, a boiler and fitted cupboards.

Eddie has cared lovingly for his home ever since and it has retained many of its original features. "The demolition is breaking my heart," he says. "Quite honestly, it will be the finish of me if I have to move. I don't like to think of them being pulled down."

Factories no longer in use for war-time manufacture were turned over to the mass-production of parts that could be constructed into a house in less than a day, and prefabs sprang up all over the country, from Birmingham to Wales. Ex-residents form a rather starry line-up – Sir Michael Caine grew up in one in Elephant and Castle and Barbara Windsor spent her childhood in one in Stoke Newington.

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE



Eddie O'Mahony, 2003



Part of the Excalibur Estate boarded up, January 2014

The former Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, who grew up in a prefab in Tredegar, south Wales, recalls: "It was a remarkable dwelling and a piece of wonderful engineering. We used to get visitors from all over the place just to come see this amazing house. The great thing about prefabs is that they face each other and you can't be isolated, unlike in high-rise flats." The process of 'decanting' has already started and many of the prefabs on Excalibur now stand empty, boarded off by a tall plywood fence. "I close my eyes when I pass the ones that are boarded up," says Eddie, "I've loved this place from day one."

The Prefab Museum will be open throughout the summer.

THE PREFAB MUSEUM

17 Meliot Road, London SE6 1RY

A celebration of prefab life
in a real post-war prefabricated house
on the Excalibur Estate, Catford, South London

EXTENDED!

The Prefab Museum
will now stay open till the end of the summer

Opening Times:

Saturdays from 11:00 - 17:00,
weekdays by appointment only

FREE ENTRY

Events at the Prefab Museum to be announced on:
www.facebook.com/PalacesForThePeople



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

www.elisabethblanchet.com

From the Prefab Museum visitors' book:

25 March - "Fantastic exhibition! I lived in a prefab in Edinburgh from 1946-1960. I was three years old when my parents and brother and sister moved in. Good luck in your efforts and thanks for the wonderful memory." Rob Collins

15 March - "Thank you for taking the time to put on this exhibition. It brings back many happy memories. It has been a very emotional experience - the layout is similar to my granddad's prefab. The smell is the same!" Matthew Adlington

HEBRIDES HOMES

ARCHITECT AND HOUSING SPECIALIST MATT BRUCE REVEALS THE FASCINATING HISTORY OF PREFABS ON SCOTLAND'S ISLE OF LEWIS

During the Second World War there was a severe housing shortage on the Outer Hebrides. The typical housing stock on the islands at that time were thatch-roofed houses with stone walls that needed annual re-roofing. With most of the men away, a lot of houses simply became uninhabitable.

This resulted, in early 1945, in a plan to build 500 new houses on the Isle of Lewis alone (there were 5,000 houses on the island already – and a lot of them in poor condition). With men returning to the islands after being released from the forces, overcrowding and making do in sheds was common.

The local MP took up their cause and money was found to build 50 prefabs in Plasterfield, outside Stornoway. Because of concern among local building consultants that standard prefabs would not withstand the high winds on the islands, a Phoenix design was used in 1947 with an extra skin of blocks on the outside, which were rendered with cement mortar. The houses had solid-fuel fires and space at the end of each row of houses for a peat stack for each house.



Stornoway Prefabs 2012



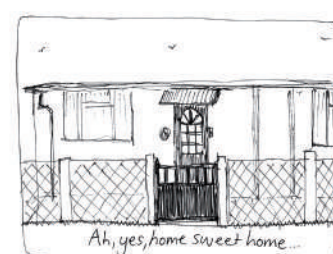
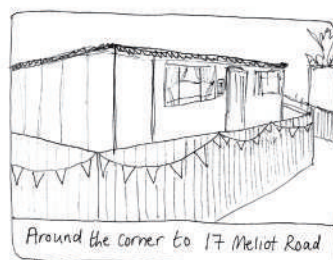
Stornoway Prefabs 2012

The houses were so popular that there were protests held about who they would be allocated to. Even though they were designed for a 10-year life, they are still standing and are very popular. Initial rents were £20 a year plus an extra £5 for water, sewerage and rubbish collection. It took another 15 years to build the other 450 standard houses.

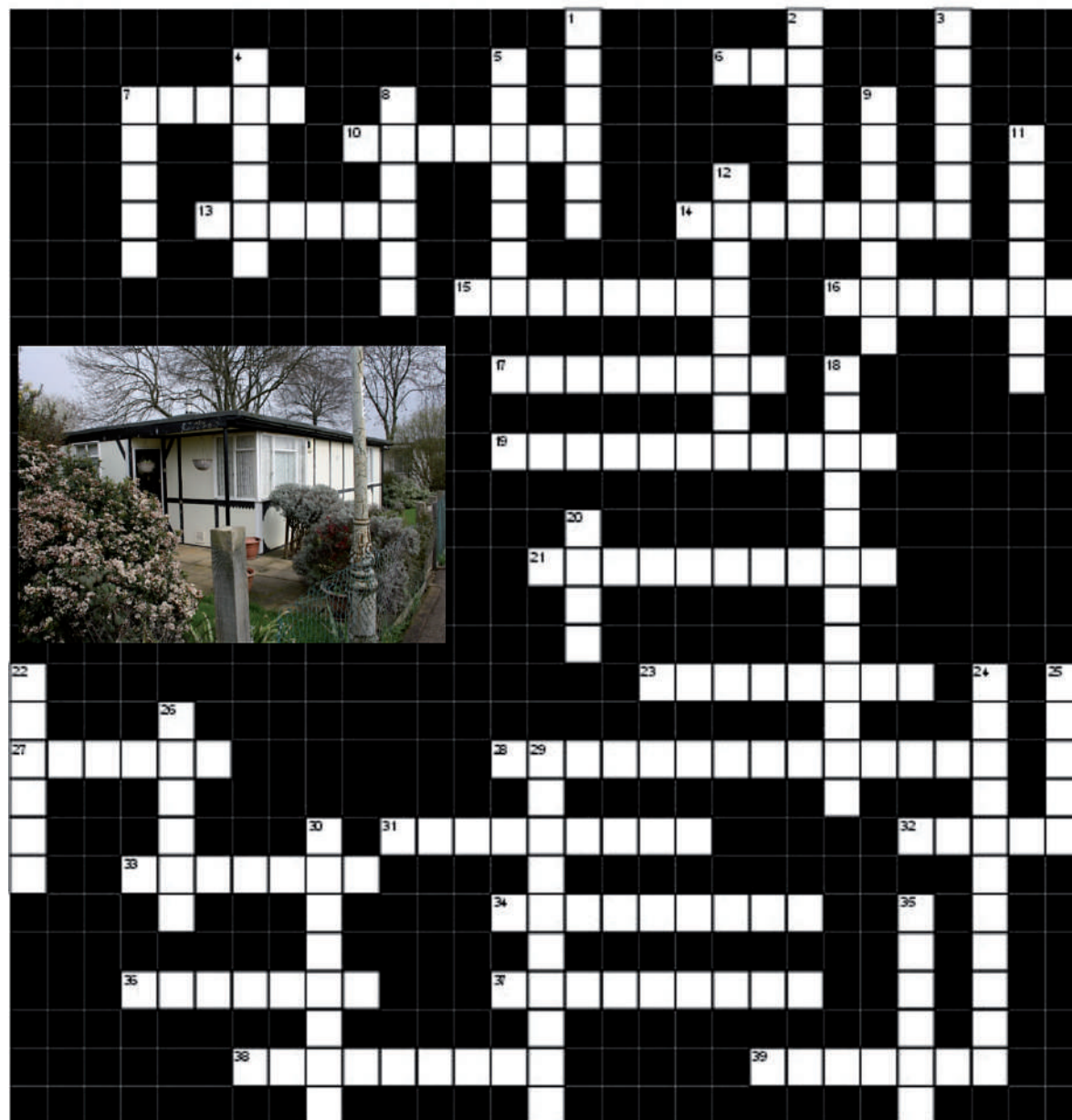


Stornoway Prefabs 2012

A NICE DAY FOR A TRIP TO THE PREFAB MUSEUM



FOR MY NEW FRIEND TED
BY KEARA STEWART



Across

6. Number of bedrooms in the Excalibur prefabs (3)
7. Aluminium prefab type (5)
10. The illegitimate son of Arthur with his half-sister Margawse (7)
13. The Prefab Museum is located in this road (6)
14. The number of prefab types manufactured for the temporary housing programme (8)
15. Manufacturer of the prefabs' steel framed windows (8)
16. Modern and fitted, the height of modernity (7)
17. This prefab type was constructed in Letchworth Garden City (8)
19. From a South Wales prefab to politician to peer (11, 2)
21. Does this singer have stardust memories of his prefab? (10, 2)
23. Close to a Road (8)
27. Six prefabs on the Excalibur Estate are (6)
28. This actress didn't Carry On living in a prefab (14, 2)
31. The sword in the stone (9)
32. This locally produced prefab is on display at the Open Air Museum (5)
33. This Rural Life museum in Surrey has a prefab on show (7)
34. Far flung prefab in Scotland (9)
36. This museum in Cambridgeshire has a prefab on show (7)
37. Biggest ever post war prefab estate in the UK, in Liverpool (9, 2)
38. This museum in Bromsgrove has a prefab on show (9)
39. Sir of Inde, the Indigo Knight and the name of an Excalibur Road (7)

Down

1. Gas powered gadget (6)
2. Gas powered water boiler (6)
3. Prefabs were imported from this Scandinavian country (6)
4. In 1946 many people had to use an outdoor one (6)
5. Name of the family who bequeathed the local park (7)
7. Steel-framed prefab type with asbestos panels (5)
8. Prefab prototype, named after a Lord (6)
9. The name of this prefab type is the same as the local housing association (7)
11. Type of the prefab on the Excalibur Estate (7)
12. This Open Air Museum in Chalfont St Giles also has a prefab that you can visit (8)
18. South London born actor who lived in a prefab (12, 2)
20. This London art gallery hosted an exhibition of prefabs in 1944 (4)
22. Author of Morte D'Arthur (6)
24. The 'core' of a prefab (11, 2)
25. Another prefab type of precast concrete (5)
26. These prisoners of war helped construct the Excalibur Estate (6)
29. They were dug for Britain before Excalibur was built (10)
30. An indoor luxury, in 1946 (8)
35. Timber framed prefab type (6)

COLLECT THE CROSSWORD ANSWERS FROM THE PREFAB MUSEUM

THE PREFAB POST

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