

Christmas In The Prefabs

Enjoy a delicious helping of nostalgia as Gregory Holyoake transports us back to the Fifties.

WINTER came early to the prefab where I lived in Deal, Kent, as an only child after the last war. Snow and ice brought social activities to our



A 1950s box of Christmas crackers

ventriloquist dummy worked by his creator, Peter Brough. We never once saw his lips move as we laughed at his antics by the light of the dial!

Best of all I loved

reading my weekly comics, *The Dandy* and *Beano*, while lying flat on my tummy, legs swinging in the air, on the half-moon rug as I was scorched down one side by the fire. Christmas was just around the corner . . .

Mid-December there was a desperate hunt for decorations. Suddenly, our prefab became vibrant with colour. Paper garlands concertinaed round the walls and criss-crossed the ceiling of our lounge. These were interspersed with gigantic circles, stars and bells.

Favourites were the miniature Chinese lanterns in pastel shades. We hung up a sprig of mistletoe, though there was nobody much to kiss. Fifties decorations were chunky, gaudy and oppressive, but I loved them and wished they would stay up all year round.

A handmade crib was placed lovingly on mum's utility sewing table in one

cul-de-sac – sliding, skating, tobogganing – but fog or drizzle forced even the hardy Carter Avenue gang to retreat into their cosy prefabricated post-war homes.

At Number 16, thick velvet drapes replaced the floral-patterned summer curtains. The bulky sofa was drawn up beside the hearth and steaming mugs of Ovaltine or Horlicks were sipped in front of the blazing coal fire.

Dad might select a 78 rpm record to play on our radiogram. He liked the female singers – Eve Boswell, Alma Cogan, Vera Lynn, Anne Shelton and the adorable Beverley Sisters – although Mum preferred listening to the *BBC Light Programme* on our wireless.

We all enjoyed the comedy series featuring Ted Ray, Jimmy Clitheroe, the American Lyons family in London or the irrepressible Archie Andrews, a



Winter comes early for Gregory at 16, Carter Avenue, Deal, Kent

corner and the plaster figures of the Holy Family lovingly laid out on cotton-wool snow. Pity that the Three Kings now bore chipped gifts, but Baby Jesus looked snug in his cardboard cradle.

At least he could reach out and help himself to the bowls of nuts with the awkward crackers, presentation boxes of crystalised fruits, oval cardboard trays of sticky dates with their plastic forks and mandarins seasonally wrapped in soft tissue paper.

There was great excitement when Dad unfolded our artificial Christmas tree, stored in a cupboard for most of the year. Three feet high with green needles attached to a wire frame, it resembled an outsized bottle brush. Each year Father assumed the task of decorating the tree. He might even invest in a set of blown-glass baubles

from Woolworths.

Traditional features of our family tree included a miniature basket woven from raffia, a pair of glass birds with brush tails and a miniature dolly – whose eyes rolled heavenwards – that served as a fairy, perched precariously on the topmost branch.

We added plastic icicles, tinkling bells and strips of tinsel. Finally, the string of coloured lights was wound around before Mum performed the grand switching-on ceremony. Dad would only allow flashing lights since he considered this would halve the electricity bill.

Every evening we went carolling round the prefabs. We sang two full verses before we dared ask for money. (“You knock and I’ll ask.”) I wrote a letter to Santa and posted it up the narrow chimney. Top of my wish list

> was a Hornby Dublo electric train set. I was concerned his reindeers might not be able to land on our low, ribbed aluminium roof.

One day I awoke to find that it had snowed overnight, deep and crisp and even. Muffled up with duffel coat, scarf and mittens – sniffing Vick and sucking Zubes to ward off colds – I raced into the avenue to join a terrific snowball fight.

Dads knocked up sleds for rapid rides down snowbound slopes; Mums helped roll a snowman whose body we shaped by patting down with shovels. Lumps of coal for eyes, a carrot for a nose and a borrowed pipe for his mouth. When the thaw set in, all my mates watched, noses pressed against window-panes as our snowman melted and withered away.

Christmas Eve was a most exciting time. Eagerly I fought my way through the crowds at Woolworths. Shop girls with holly pinned to their white caps stood at the centre of their long



Gregory rides his new tricycle around the avenue



Gregory and his neighbour, Susan, beside their dressed snowman

mahogany counters. They guarded trillions of treasures: cowboys hats, kaleidoscopes, Plasticine strips, pencil sharpeners in the shape of crocodiles and plastic animals that wobbled down slopes.

This time, though, my object was to buy presents for my parents. Mum had given me money to buy something for Dad; Dad had given me money to buy for Mum. I chose a puncture repair kit and a waffle iron respectively, which I would wrap secretly in coloured paper tied with twine that evening.

Christmas morning I awoke far too early to find that Santa had not forgotten this shy prefab lad. I bounced to the end of my twin bed to investigate the contents of my pillow case, stuffed with surprises. Money may have been in short supply in those post-war years, but my family had ensured there were plentiful small gifts to enjoy.

I opened my presents from relatives with care: Noddy soap, a glass snowstorm, rolling stock for my clockwork train set. Mum and Dad gave me their gift separately. One year it was



Gregory's cosy prefab decorated for the Christmas season

a Mickey Mouse Timex wristwatch; another time it was a Raleigh bicycle.

I dashed out into the avenue where my mates were busy trying out each others' spoils: trikes and bikes, pedal cars and scooters to ride around the pavement. We only came in when batteries ran out or our gift was broken.

Meantime, my parents were occupied in making the prefab truly festive. Breakfast over, Mum peeled the vegetables while Dad got the fire going. They snatched a few moments to open their presents, making appropriate noises of appreciation.

A trio of boxed handkerchiefs for the top pocket of his blazer and Old Spice aftershave for Dad; a sherry set consisting of six tumblers and a decanter decorated with playing cards and Bronnley rose- and geranium-scented soaps for Mum. Mindful of

wartime rationing, Gran, our welcome guest, sat in one corner smoothing the wrapping paper and winding up discarded string in readiness for future Christmases.

The three chefs worked harmoniously in our tiny fitted kitchen – a rare demonstration of peace and goodwill among my family. Christmas lunch might consist of chicken, considered a real luxury in the 1950s.

After lunch we settled down to watch the Queen's Speech. The young Elizabeth II made her first televised Christmas broadcast in 1957. This coincided with our first gogglebox, a Decca console with sliding doors and a mammoth 17-inch screen.

Late afternoon, when it was already dark outside, I might thumb through my Christmas annuals: *Rupert Bear*, *Tiger Tim* or *Mabel Lucy Atwell*. Perhaps >

- > there was a pop-up book or a greetings card in the form of a record that played *Jingle Bells* or *White Christmas*.

Eventually, we pulled up the sofa to the open fire and watched our brand-new TV as a family. All our favourites appeared in black and white: *Chipperfield's Circus*, *Carols from Canterbury Cathedral* and *Christmas Night with the Stars*.

Inevitably, Boxing Day was an anticlimax. The Salvation Army Band played carols in the avenue, while a bonneted lassie knocked on our front door rattling a collection tin. We felt we had given enough to charity. The dustmen had already received a ten-shilling note in an envelope taped to the dustbin lid as their Christmas box.

Lunch was cold meat and pickles before the family dozed again in front of the television: steeplechasing at Kempton Park or motor racing from



Carols for Christmas on the Decca console TV



Festive covers for the Radio and TV Times

Brands Hatch. I played with my Dinky or Corgi cars until a family game of Housey Housey, forerunner of Bingo, was announced.

Everyone was then quiet while I gave a hesitant performance of conjuring tricks in pale imitation of magician David Nixon, or a laborious one-man marionette show employing my prized Pelham Puppets.

Evening television might include a special variety show starring Arthur Askey, Charlie Drake, Billy Cotton or the Black and White Minstrels. Close down on BBC would be well before midnight. I would retire to my bedroom where I snuggled down beneath the woollen blankets, toast my toes on the hot water bottle and cuddle my battered teddy bear.

As I fell contentedly asleep, I wondered how I would ever get through the next 12 months of the year before Christmas came round again.