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# London's post-war prefabs

Jane Hearn, curator, the Prefab Museum



*Excalibur 003, Persant Road, Grade II listed*  
© Prefab Museum

I was born, raised and still live in London. My background is in design, adult education and training, and latterly projects that focus on aspects of community and the lives and experiences of people whose memories often pass under the radar. My interest in post-war prefabs began in the early 1990s when I went to work at a community organization near to where I live in southeast London and noticed the number of prefabs still up in my local area.

Over time many of these prefabs were replaced with modern housing. The imminent demolition in 2008-9 of a large group on the Excalibur Estate in Catford, and the heroic attempts to save them by its residents, focused my interest on the history of prefabs and the memories of the people who lived in them.

The Prefab Museum is an online museum, archive and resource about Britain's post-war prefabs. Part of the Temporary Housing and Emergency Factory Made Homes programmes, 156,623 prefabricated bungalows were erected across the UK between 1945 and 1948 to rehouse ex-servicemen and their families, people who had been bombed-out and key workers.

The museum was set up in a vacant prefab in 2014 on the Catford estate as a collaboration between Elisabeth Blanchet, who had been documenting prefabs independently, and myself to highlight the importance of prefabs in post-war recovery through interpretations by artists. These included drawings, films and photographs, and an installation. The museum proved to be very popular, with an estimated 4,000 people visiting from March to October 2014, when the museum was forced to close.

At the time we believed the number of prefabs to have dwindled to under 1,000 left standing and lived in, with the last surviving large group of 187 in London on the Excalibur Estate in Catford.

Ten years later many more, possibly 8,000, have been recorded as surviving around the UK. The Excalibur Estate remains the only group of prefabs in London, with six of the prefabs listed by Historic England at Grade II, although the estate has been diminished by redevelopment. Other prefab estates have had their exteriors remodelled and overclad, some were dismantled and re-used as farm buildings and holiday homes.

My overriding impression from the visitors, and those who subsequently contacted us, was how much this initiative was needed and provided the spur to continue researching and documenting these much-loved homes. The prefabs had previously unheard-of modern facilities and an abiding sense of community, that were mourned when they were demolished. It provided the impetus to keep memories of the prefabs alive and continue the research into their history, design and context in a post-war world.

## Planning

In 1942, following the Blitz, the Burt Committee was set up by the wartime coalition Government to provide guidance on the housing shortage. The committee recommended temporary housing as a solution to the shortage of construction workers and the destruction of housing in the Blitz. They aimed to accommodate servicemen returning from the war, people made homeless by bombing, living in overcrowded and insanitary conditions, and key workers. As early as 1941, local authorities had been meeting to discuss proposals for prefabricated sectional bungalows to be stored at key points across the country.

Temporary structures, like Nissen and Seco huts, were adapted for short term use as housing. The famous photo of Gunner Hector Murdoch returning home to his family in their new prefab was in fact a Seco Hut, not nearly as luxurious! On 26 March 1944, Winston Churchill broadcast a speech titled "Our Greatest Effort is Coming", in



*Top: Seco Hut, East Ferry Road, Isle of Dogs  
© Jasmine Taylor*

*Above: Nissen Hut, Bentham Road, Hackney  
© Peter Kurton*

which he mentioned prefabs as a solution for re-housing servicemen coming back from the war and their young families. D-Day hadn't even happened, nor the infamous V1 and V2 attacks from the end of March 1944, and Churchill already promised the building of 500,000 of these new all mod-cons detached cottages.

### **Design**

Research and planning went into their development, how best to address the housing crisis caused by the devastation of war, the shortage of skilled construction workers who had been called up or on other war work and being able to provide semi and unskilled work for returning troops.

The result was the 'prefab' which was made of pre-fabricated parts and could be put together and erected by semi and unskilled workers. The prefabs were designed to be 'demountable' ie, they could be assembled, taken apart and reassembled.

A prototype of an all-steel two-bedroom bungalow, the Portal House, was exhibited. Architects, in partnership with construction companies, produced designs based on this prototype.

Only one was ever produced, and a shortage of steel meant that other solutions had to be found including aluminium alloy, asbestos cement, pre-cast reinforced concrete, with steel and timber for the frames. Designs were exhibited at the Tate Gallery (now Tate Britain) and across the UK. When the designs were finalised some models were taken abroad to demonstrate to the troops.

Prefabs were designed to have fitted kitchens, cupboards and wardrobes, an indoor toilet and bathroom with heated towel rail, constant hot water, a vented heating system – and a fridge!

### *Manufacture*

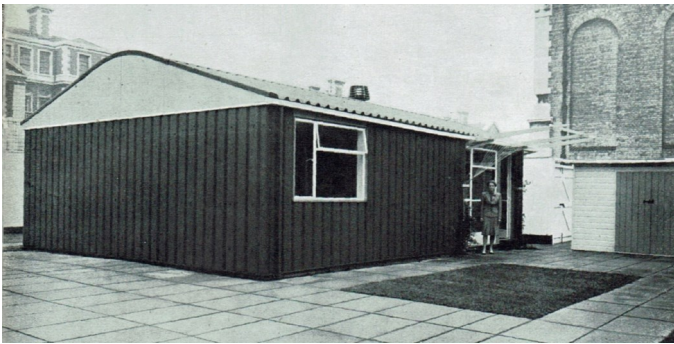
Several major construction companies including Taylor Woodrow (now Taylor Wimpey), Henry Boot, Tarran Industries and Seco were contracted to coordinate the manufacture of prefab components or organise sub-contractors.

Some manufacturers involved in prefab production include Turner and Newall (asbestos cement), Fisher and Ludlow (service units), Stewarts and Lloyds (tubular steel for Arcon roof), Crittall (steel windows), Williams and Williams (steel framework for the walls) Darlington & Simpson Rolling Mills (steel), Pressed Steel Company (Portal house) and Briggs (steel tubes).

### *Legislation*

On 10 October 1944, the Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act was passed.

Local authorities were given extensive powers of compulsory purchase, from empty homes to bomb sites to vacant land, on which to place the prefabs. They applied for the number of prefabs they needed to the Ministry of Works and were given a deadline of December 1945 to secure the sites. Plans were submitted for approval to the MoW for the layout of the prefabs, and the sites were prepared to receive the prefabs. This included roads, utilities and drainage, and preparing the bases. It also included clearing and levelling bomb sites. When



*Top: Portal House and floor plan*

© Prefab Museum

*Above: Tate Gallery exhibition and Arcon prototype on tour*

© Prefab Museum

former prisoner of war, who had been incarcerated in the camp on Beckenham Place Park, made contact with Eddie to reminisce about building the drains for the estate!

#### *Lifespan*

Prefabs were designed with a life of 60 years. The government supported their maintenance for a period of ten years from the end of the programme in 1948, after which they were sold on the open market and/or transferred to local authorities including the London County Council.

#### **Prefabs in London**

By June 1945 the London County Council had been allocated 12,000 prefabs and found sites for 10,301. Of them, 8,301 were found within the county of London and 2,000 on sites outside London that the LCC had earmarked for development.

The Ministry of Works envisaged groups of 50 prefabs, but an average of nine were erected in cities; sometimes just one or two were fitted in to a vacant site. Outside London, much bigger estates could be planned. In Harold Hill, 605 prefabs were erected on 72 acres and two estates of 400 and 220 prefabs were located in Shirley and New Addington.

Although prefabs couldn't be erected on Royal Parks they came pretty close. There

completed, the sites were handed over to the Ministry of Works who organised the delivery and erection of the prefabs.

A further bill was passed to enable prefabs to be placed on public parks and open spaces, initially for a period of ten years. This had to be extended for a further ten years until 1968, by which time people wanted their parks back! The Royal Parks were exempted.

#### *Types*

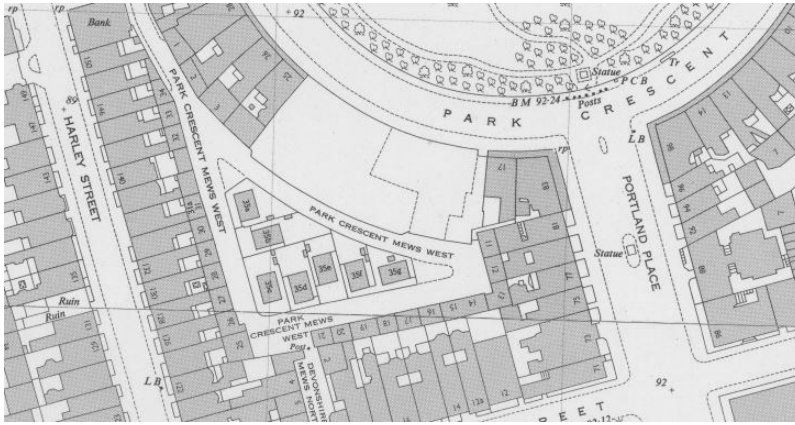
The aluminium alloy AIROH B2 was the most fully prefabricated of the various types; cast in four sections which were bolted together on site. Aircraft Industries Research on Housing proposed houses as a solution to post-war aluminium production as early as 1942. The other types of prefab had hundreds or thousands of component parts. Detailed assembly instructions were provided, but often local building firms and even prisoners of war were utilised to put them up. Prisoners of war were also used in the manufacture of prefabs and preparation of the sites.

The story of one Excalibur Estate resident, Eddie O'Mahony, who had lived in his prefab since 1946 and was fighting to save it from demolition, was featured on German media. A



*Prefab kitchen, National Museum of Wales.*

© Prefab Museum



Left: *Crescent West TQ2881NE - A, Surveyed/Revised: 1952, Published: 1953*

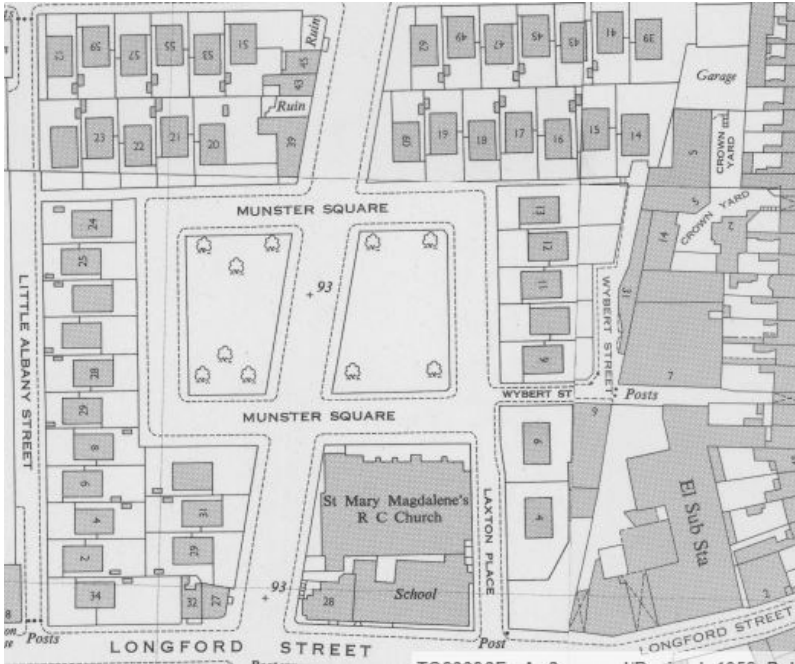
© Ordnance Survey

Left below: *Munster Square. TQ2882SE - A, Surveyed/Revised: 1952, Published: 1953*

© Ordnance Survey

Left bottom: *Uni-Seco prefab, 11 Munster Square*

© Jonathan and Sylvia Henley



were six prefabs on Phillimore Gardens, Kensington, overlooking Holland Park. Phillimore Gardens is now the most expensive street in Britain! Between Harley Street and Portland Place, seven prefabs were erected in Park Crescent Mews West, with a further 46 at Munster Square, close to the eastern edge of Regents Park.

There are two films showing Park Crescent Mews West, <https://film.iwmcollections.org.uk/record/2080> and <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/98591/>

Some prefabs were dismantled or demolished before the ten-year period was up in 1958 and replaced with modern housing and flats.

Others lasted much longer, through the creation of the Greater London Council in 1965 to its abolition in 1986 and were transferred to London boroughs before they were eventually replaced.

#### *Documentary evidence*

The London Metropolitan Archives holds the archives of the LCC and GLC, and photos. There are patchy records by individual boroughs, for example [boroughphotos.org](http://boroughphotos.org) has collections from only 12 of the London boroughs. Some are more comprehensive than others, which may have none at all; Lambeth has a good selection of prefab photos but Lewisham, which had nearly 3,000 prefabs, has eight of the same prefab being demolished.

You can find prefab photos on various sites; Flickr and Facebook, and within individual borough archives. Sadly some of the small, funded projects that documented prefabs in a particular area let their websites lapse after the projects ended and are no longer available.



### Mapping prefabs in London and the southeast

From pins in a map of the UK on the Prefab Museum wall and a book where people could write where their prefab was, a picture began to emerge how many prefabs there were and where they were located. This was greatly enhanced by the National Library of Scotland's Ordnance Survey digitisation project. Once a prefab could be identified in a location it could be verified on one of the maps. Roads had disappeared as part of a wider clearance or had been renamed. The Prefab Museum map on Google maps has attracted memories and sometimes photographs.



*LCC mobile homes. Taken from the old Bishopsgate railway viaduct overlooking the old East London Line and Shoreditch station.*

© David Johnson

Other ways of verifying prefabs and their locations are through historical aerial photographs from Britain From Above and Historic England's aerial photographic archive. Some were taken by the RAF in 1946 and show the bases of the prefabs under construction. In many cases the type of prefab can be identified by zooming in.

<https://www.britainfromabove.org.uk/> and <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/>

#### *Other prefabs erected by the London County Council*

In the early 1960s the LCC commissioned the design of mobile homes and sun cottages in conjunction with the Timber Development Association. These distinctive black and white prefabs, sometimes called the Terrapin House, came in two halves and could be supported on blocks of paving stones. Sun cottages were smaller and more akin to holiday chalets. Many were placed on cleared or empty sites; others replaced demolished post-war prefabs, presumably due to existing utilities and services. LCC Mobile Homes and sun cottages are unmarked on OS maps so are difficult to locate but some records exist in the London Metropolitan Archives.

A British Pathe film – Mobile Houses. Streatham, London – shows the mobile homes being erected <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/190912/>. Like their post-war predecessors, the LCC mobiles are just as fondly remembered.

When I first moved to south-east London in 1985 I was surprised to see so many prefabs still up and lived in. Later I found out that some had been purchased (for cash) under Right to Buy legislation. One by one they have

been demolished, although a few surprises remain.

*Below: Arcon, Bramshot Avenue, SE7*

© Prefab Museum



If you travel on the Blackwall Tunnel southern approach, just before the slip road to Sun in the Sands roundabout, there is an elderly Arcon prefab on the left in Bramshot Avenue, SE7. In Drakefell Road, SE14, the last of two prefabs awaits demolition and in the back garden of Harefield Road, SE4, there is a Nissen hut! Who knows where else they may be?!

#### **The future of the Prefab Museum**

The Prefab Museum celebrated its tenth anniversary in March 2024. Elisabeth Blanchet, the original collaborator, moved to the south of France in 2016 and resigned from the museum in early 2018. It is a real pleasure to continue to



*Top: Uni-Seco, Drakefell Road, SE14*

© Prefab Museum

*Above: Nissen Hut, Harefield Road, SE4*

© Prefab Museum

receive memories, photos and locations, answer the many questions about prefabs and add new information to the resources. The museum could not exist without the active assistance of volunteers in tracking down and recognizing refurbished prefabs, adding their memories or alerting me to where they are under threat of demolition.

It makes me proud that people now write to me knowing their type of prefab instead of trying to describe it from memory, and happy to be able to put others in contact with their childhood friends in the prefabs through viewing the archive. Of the 156,623 prefabs erected between 1945-8 the museum archive contains approximately 500 collections of personal photographs. Photos of the many thousands of others may never emerge, but I am constantly taken by surprise.

The Heritage Lottery Fund (now the National Lottery Heritage Fund) supported the maintenance and hosting of the website for five years after the end of the Moving Prefab Museum and Archive project in March 2018. My intention is to support the website and archive until at least 2028 and I have recently been able to transfer to a cheaper hosting solution.

I hope to find a permanent home for the archive material after I am no longer able to support it. In the meantime, while it continues to give pleasure and is informative and useful, I will keep it going!

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