

Life in the Prefabs

During and after WW2 there was shortage of housing in the UK. In 1943, the government started to address this need by introducing “prefabs.” These were prefabricated homes, all on one level and they could be erected on site very quickly. There were thirteen different types of prefabs and eleven different manufacturers. Each manufacturer had their own designs and used various materials in the making of these homes. These small, compact houses were meant to provide temporary housing for the thousands of people who needed a home, quickly.

I was a few months old when, in 1946, my family moved into 8 Racefield St. We did not move out until I was about sixteen, so not so temporary after all! I have no idea which type of prefab was used in Lymm, but, I do remember that the outsides were a sort of pebble dash effect and the roofs were made from asbestos. Not a healthy choice for roofing material, but there was not the same knowledge back then about the dangers of asbestos. For the times, those prefabs were considered quite luxurious, with their fitted kitchens, gas stoves, gas wash boilers and gas fridges. Every room had fitted cupboards, drawers and shelves; there was no lack of storage space. The two bedrooms both had fitted wardrobes and the back bedroom had a whole wall of cupboards and drawers.

The toilet was separate from the bathroom itself, something that many of the new owners found quite innovative. Many, like my mum and dad, had never actually had a bathroom before; it was still the age of outside “lavvies” and tin baths in front of the fire! There were even shelves in the bathroom, at one end of the bath. A chrome towel rail was included in the fittings and I seem to remember it was heated. In the hallway there were more cupboards and an “airing” cupboard, and on the other side of the wall from that was the back boiler for the fireplace, so that cupboard was the place to keep your bedding and towels so they would be warm. An immersion heater fitted into the cupboard too, for during the summer when you did not need a coal fire roaring away.

The actual fireplace had two small doors, which were fitted with little windows that were made out of some fireproof material. At the bottom of the fireplace was a vent. The idea was that if you closed the fireplace doors and opened the vent, warm air would circulate into the living room. All I remember was that, in the winter, once you moved away from the fire, it was cold! Both bedrooms had this same venting system. The vent system did not work well if you used coke for fuel, as the fumes were toxic! I don't think my family used the vents as we often burned coke in our fireplace.

Outside in the back yard was a coal shed (this too had an asbestos roof). I remember the coal man coming up the path, heavy sacks on his back, coal dust glittering on his clothes and his cap. I think it was Arthur Gough at that time. The size of your back garden depended on which prefabs you lived in; those which faced the allotments had large gardens and the rest had slightly smaller gardens at the back. My dad grew lots of vegetables, and neighbours used to come and buy a lettuce for a few pennies! We also had part of the allotments that we could use, just on the other side of the back fence. Dad kept chickens and I remember the smell of the mash that my mum used to cook up on the stove in the winter so they

would have a warm meal and, hopefully, keep laying eggs! A few other neighbours had chickens too, while some just kept an old shed or a small greenhouse on their allotments.

Our front gardens were always well kept, people took pride in the small lawns and their flower beds. We had the same flowers, year after year: wall flowers and snapdragons. I still cannot think of wallflowers without thinking of my dad.

For several years my dad worked at the local Gas Works. He only had to cross the back garden and the allotments and he was there. His job was to shovel coal into "retorts," where gas was piped off and the end result was coke. I am not sure about the actual process but, coke could be used as a fuel, it burned more slowly and gave less heat than coal, but it was cheap. The gas was stored in a huge gasometer (or gas holder), this large metal holding tank went up or down, depending on how much gas it held. As most of the households in Lymm at that time were using gas for cooking, it must have taken a lot of coal to keep the supply up. There was no safety equipment back then, so dad and the others working in that environment would have been subject to all kinds of toxic fumes. Maybe that was why, in later years, my dad always had breathing problems and in fact he died of lung cancer in 1963.

At the bottom end of the allotments ran the Bridgewater Canal. I used to see narrow boats chugging up and down the canal, often dropping loads of coal off at the wharf attached to the Gas Works. The prefabs closest to the canal were always a little damp, and often the smell of the canal was not too pleasant!

There were several families in the prefabs with young children, so there was never a shortage of friends to play with. We rode bikes, played hide and seek, had a game of marbles and even roller skated on the relatively smooth piece of road at the top of the street. As we became older, we sometimes congregated under the street light in the cul-de-sac. We used to get into trouble if we hung around by Mrs. Leather's shop which was on the corner of Pepper Street and Orchard Avenue. We would lean on the windows and pick the putty out of the window frames! Looking back, we must have been a nuisance and deserved the times she came out and yelled at us!

Milk was delivered by the Co-op milkman. His name was Wilf and he was always whistling, especially close to Christmas because everyone would invite him in for a "little drink." I know my dad used to give him a "tot" to warm him up. It was surprising that he managed to finish his milk round in one piece! That wouldn't be allowed now, but, back then, it was never seen as a problem.

Joe Blinston, a local farmer, used to bring his horse and cart down the street now and again. He had a pair of scales on the cart and he would weigh out potatoes and carrots for people. The horse's name was Charlie. He was big and black and very gentle, and just plodded along pulling the cart and Joe, who would stick a nose bag on him whenever he stopped to sell his vegetables.

Lewis's ice cream van made the rounds in the summer. You could hear the tinkling music as it made its way down the street. A "cornet" with raspberry vinegar dripping off the top was my favourite!

The prefabs may have had their downsides (the cold, the damp, the lack of room), but, to me, my sister Dorothy, and many others in Lymm and other parts of the UK, they were home. Last time I was back in Lymm, visiting from Canada, I went to what used to be Racefield St. It simply was not the same place, it did not have the same "feeling." The old prefabs were gone, with nothing left to tell anyone that this used to be a street of families, working, laughing, playing. There were no allotments, no cul-de-sac with its lamp post, no washing blowing on lines in back gardens. Everything changes, and it is true what they say, you cannot go back, but, sometimes, when I am just sitting thinking of my life in Lymm, I can almost smell wallflowers in the summer sun, hear the tinkle of an ice cream van and see my dad, coming home from work, covered in coal dust. Such memories!

I hope these memories will be of use to someone at the Heritage Centre. My dear sister, Dorothy contributed some of her memories of the prefabs too. It truly was a different time.
Sincerely, Doreen Harrison nee Booth, British Columbia, Canada. 2018