

Prefabs

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As the countryside near my home becomes swallowed up by housing estates and road schemes, my thoughts wander back to another time.

The Ewell I remember during my childhood, in the post-war years, was a haven of countryside on the edge of London. Like many other people at that time, my parents thought they were very fortunate in having a 'prefab' dwelling allocated to them.

I had only made my entry into the world a few weeks before our family took up residence in Curtis Road in 1946. Our home was small, but way ahead of its time in design. Despite its lack of proper foundations, it contained a normal number of rooms and the kitchen even had a built-in cooker, 'fridge and copper.

Our home was alongside about fifty others, next to a large field, at the bottom of which flowed the Hogsmill River. From our garden we could see miles of unspoilt countryside stretching away towards Esher. The same view is now covered by a huge council estate.



From our kitchen window, we could look cross the fields and watch distant steam trains slowly pulling in and out of Tolworth Station. I spent many happy hours fishing in the river with the help of a home-made net and a jam-jar. The water was crystal-clear and clean enough to paddle in. A huge oak-tree in the field had a sturdy rope attached to one of its large branches to swing on.



The inhabitants of the prefabs took great pride in them. Even though we were living in the wake of terrible devastation, our small community remained strong in spirit. The grim asbestos walls of our homes were soon surrounded by trim gardens, burgeoning with flowers and vegetables, and children were firmly reprimanded if they dared to desecrate their new world with anything more damaging to their environment than a hopscotch game

chalked on the ground.

When I was fairly young, my father deserted us and life became pretty hard. Even so, those days seemed to lack the fear of burglary that seems to pervade our existence now. In the 21 years I lived in the prefab, our back door was always unlocked day and night.



In the late 1940s and early 1950s, few people - particularly in our low income bracket - had their own transport. The world was often brought to our door. Apart from our usual milk delivery, we had a visiting baker, greengrocer, French onion sellers (complete with berets) and a knife-grinder. Epsom Racecourse was only three miles away and,



during the weeks preceding Derby Day, we would be inundated with Romany gypsies trying to sell us home-made clothes-pegs, key-rings or bunches of heather. Sometimes Indians in exotic turbans would arrive at the door trying to sell garish silk ties. One elderly hawker, who was nearly blind, would regularly arrive with an old battered suitcase overflowing with wares. He would try to tempt mother to buy nylon stockings, still scarce after the war, or some *Evening In Paris* perfume.

The hawker's visit was dreaded by mother. She could never rely on father's maintenance payment of £3 a week turning up and every purchase had to be pondered over. Sometimes she would treat us to a box of hard toilet paper, which was a real luxury in

our poverty-stricken existence. Torn-up newspaper in our lavatory was an everyday occurrence!

Luckily, many of the items in the suitcase were cheap and cheerful such as a penny packet of coloured chalks or a 2d child's drawing pad.

Many children on the estate would often play into the dark hours by the light of the street lamps. Occasionally the local 'bobby', riding his bicycle, would slowly appear, stopping to chat to residents on the way, seeming to know all their names.





Winters were dreaded in our home. Even though mother worked hard in a full-time job, wages were pitiful, so hunger was more than just a word to us. Once we lived on Sugar Puffs for two days. The prefabs were like ice-boxes in winter. With no properly insulated walls, we would huddle round the one heat source - a small fireplace in the living-room. If we couldn't afford coal, we would look for wood on the field. If times were really desperate, we would burn books we had bought at jumble sales. When the cold became unbearable, we would retire to bed with Victorian coal-irons which had been heated on the gas-stove and then wrapped in newspaper. When father didn't send maintenance money, it could mean no heating, lighting or food. Food cupboards were often completely bare.

Matches were another luxury. After all, they cost 2d. The smell epitomising my childhood is the stench of newspaper ignited on an electric fire to be used to light a gas ring. If the gas supply ran out, we would cook food over the electric fire or open fire. If there was enough gas, the stove would double as an airing cupboard, and we would often awake to the smell of burning socks or underpants!

The cold of winter could be cruel. We piled coats on the beds to keep warm and would awake to see pretty ice patterns inside our bedroom windows. Windy weather could be scary. The ceilings of the prefabs were nothing more than glorified cardboard and, when very strong gusts struck, our ceilings would literally rise a couple of inches in the air.

From the age of eight until I was 16, I would take a regular Saturday morning bus-ride to the Magistrate's Court in nearby Epsom to hopefully collect the maintenance money from my father.

When summer arrived, the local farmer would let me go 'scrumping' in his orchard. I would scoop up huge amounts of apples, damsons and the occasional egg that a passing hen or goose had thoughtfully left





behind. We weren't as hungry in the summer - but our stomachs would often ache with over-indulgence of fruit.

If our meagre income would allow, we'd take a penny bus-ride to Tolworth to enjoy a film at the Odeon.

In the days of the cinema's existence, there was nothing behind it except scrubland and, every summer, a visiting fair would delight us, complete with its accompanying zoo. Even if we couldn't afford the entrance fee, we could see the lions and tigers roaring in their cages from the pavement.

Traffic was of course quite light, and our main road was little more than a meandering farm-track. Our local shops obviated any need to travel further afield if we needed day-to-day goods. We had a traditional butcher, fish-shop a chemist sporting those wonderful large coloured bottles in its window, a bakery with its very traditional collection of flies and wasps on its displays and a hardware shop almost straight out of a Dickens novel.

When I visited Mr Dean's grocery shop, my senses would be stupefied by the aroma of loose Indian and China tea, oriental spices, giant blocks of fresh Cheddar Cheese - cut with a dangerous-looking piece of sharp wire - and bacon straight from the slicer. One of the highlights of my week, would be to visit The Co-op where I would watch with bated breath as an assistant would cut coupons from my Ration Book so I could have a whole bar of chocolate to myself.

A real treat would be to buy a pound of broken biscuits. If you were lucky you might find a tasty pink wafer in there — or even a custard cream. I would then watch wide-eyed as mother's change travelled along the shop above our heads in a money container propelled along a wire to and from the cashier.

We weren't, of course, alone in being poor. Many in the London area were in that position after the war. Even though a lot of my childhood was filled with cold and hunger and the feeling that we were different from other families, the experience had a strangely positive side to it.

The hardship I knew, coupled with a religious upbringing, equipped me with the resources to survive the sort of life trauma that could have destroyed another person. I reasoned that after suffering so much deprivation, things could only get better, and I savour the good things in life much more than I would have done if things had been 'normal'.

When I was newly-married and acquired my first 'fridge, I was thrilled to bits and kept on talking about it. Having spent an entire young life living with a 'fridge in the prefab that was for ornamental purposes only (far too expensive to actually run) my delight at being able to keep ice-cream solid was unimaginable.

Now in my sixties, I live in a very comfortable, warm home only a mile or so away from where I grew up. I really enjoy giving my son things I went without. Sometimes he asks: "What's for tea?" And I reply: "Whatever you want."

And somewhere, deep inside me, I see a hungry little girl hugging a tepid coal-iron, as she tries to keep warm on an icy night.

Ruth Jemmett © 1996.

Ruth Jemmett is a member of The Society Of Authors.



Ruth Jemmett (Nee Lyons) with husband John, son Dominic and good family friend the late Sir Norman Wisdom taken in more recent times.

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