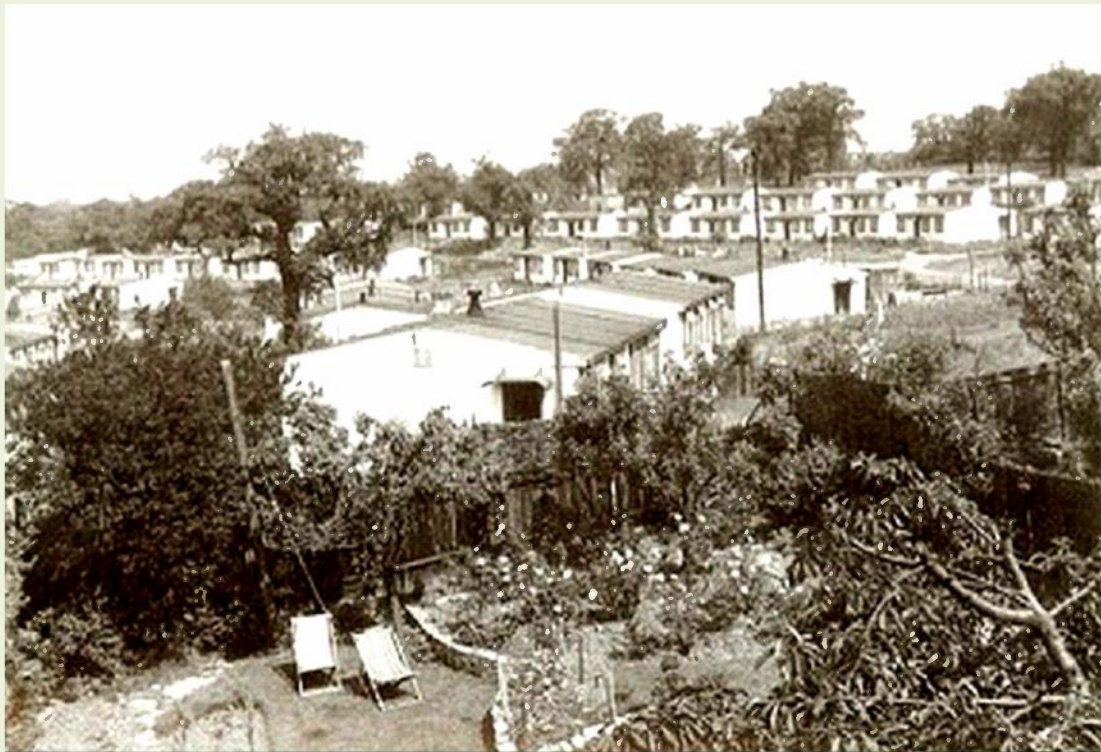


The Highams Park Prefab Estate

In 1947 Walthamstow Council erected 176 prefab homes in Highams Park. These were erected in order to address the dreadful shortage of homes for Londoners after their homes had been destroyed by WWII enemy bombing. During the years of its existence, the estate became a much loved village community for the families that lived there



Site Location

The prefab estate was erected on Highams Park in a triangle of land formed by Montalt Road, Henry's Avenue and Highams Park itself.



Above a 1950 Map of the area



Above a Plan of the Prefab Estate

The Shortage of Homes After WWII

As WWII approached its end it became obvious that Britain had suffered a huge shortage of homes destroyed by enemy bombing. In 1944, in an attempt to address this shortage, the coalition government of Prime Minister Winston Churchill introduced a Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act to provide post war temporary pre-fabricated houses. This Housing Act was intended to address the need for an anticipated 200,000 post war shortfall in the housing stock by building 500,000 pre-fabricated houses with a planned life of 10 years within a five year period. These became popularly known as 'prefabs'

The Underestimation Of The Housing Problem

But the scale of the problem was highly underestimated. At the end of the war, it was found by survey that more than three million houses had been damaged by enemy bombing, almost a quarter of all homes in the country. Most of the damaged stock was in London and the southeast, particularly in areas hit hard by Hitler's vengeance weapons. Although the building trade had taken a beating, with many of its skilled labourers killed whilst on duty as foot soldiers, the recovery in labour levels was boosted by high post-war unemployment. The envisaged shortages of basic building supplies did initially exist, but were quickly turned around: basic supplies of sand, gravel and clay to produce bricks and cement were natural resources within the geography of Great Britain, they just needed extracting.

At the end of the war, the post-war Labour Party government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee, agreed to deliver 300,000 units within 10 years, within a budget of £150m. Although, the programme got off to a good start by use of the wartime production facilities and the creation of common standards developed by the Ministry of Works, the pre-fabricated units were dearer to build than conventional houses

In the end, of 1.2 million new houses built from 1945 to 1951, when the programme officially ended, only 156,623 prefab houses were constructed. Today, a number still survive, a testament to the durability of a series of housing designs and construction methods only envisaged to last 10 years.

Prefab Design

Although the exact design of the prefabricated houses was left to the manufacturers. The prefab had small entrance hall, two bedrooms, a toilet and a bath and a kitchen. However, the criteria defined by the Ministry of Works left little scope for individualism, the main difference being the construction materials used.

All approved prefab units had to have a minimum floor space size of 635 square feet (about 60 m² for younger readers) but had to be a maximum of 7.5 feet wide to allow for transportation by road. This pretty much defined the shape of the building.



The Ministry of Works also specified that all prefab designs had to incorporate a 'service unit'. This was a combined back-to-back kitchen and bathroom that could be pre-built in a factory. The 'service unit' also contained a number of innovations for occupants. The house retained a coal-fire, but it

contained a back boiler to create both central heating as well as a constant supply of hot water. For a country used to the pleasures of the outside lavatory and tin bath, the bathroom included a flushing toilet and man-sized bath with hot running

water. In the kitchen were housed such modern luxuries as a built-in oven, refrigerator and Baxi water heater: items we now take for granted.

In the Housing Act, the Ministry of Works even specified the colour for prefabs and they all came pre-decorated in magnolia, with gloss green on all additional wood, including the door trimmings and skirting boards.

Although, by present day standards, the prefabs were very small, this has to be seen in a context where working class families had always lived in cramped and over-crowded accommodation. On the plus side they provided precious separate family accommodation that did not have to be shared with other families and which contained amenities and facilities that previously had only been 'pipe-dreams' for the new occupants.

The End Of The Prefab Estate

By the end of 1960 all the prefab occupants had been re-housed and prior to demolition in 1961 the *Highams Residents Association (HRA)* successfully lobbied the Council to have the area re-instated as a park.

The Council wanted to create an Arboretum on the site (A place where trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants are cultivated for scientific and educational purposes) Unfortunately, this wasn't possible because after demolition some of the concrete foundations and paths still existed. At the present, in dry conditions, traces of prefabs and paths can still be seen today and can also be seen on *Google Earth*.

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