An Introduction to Prefabricated Housing

Shortages

• There was a shortage of housing in Britain after the bombings of World War 2 as many houses had been destroyed.

• Large numbers of slums remained a problem and families required new homes to live in.

• Winston Churchill (the Prime Minister at the time) declared that the government would produce 500,000 prefabs to help people.

Prefab Facts

• Prefab homes were built on bomb sites, parks and open spaces.

• Prefabricated (ready-built) houses were made in factories and were reassembled on building sites. They were used in Britain to house the thousands of people made homeless by the bombings. They had good facilities such as kitchens, bathrooms and gardens.

• The steel, later aluminium, and asbestos prefabs came in kit form and took only a few days to construct. Almost 157,000 prefabs were erected in the 1940s. Although intended as a temporary housing measure (10-15 years), some still survive today.

• The then Minister of Works, Lord Portal, designed the prototype of the prefab bungalow - so the prefabs were known as a ‘Portal House’.

• Prefabs had to have a minimum floor space of 635 feet (59m²).

• So the parts could be transported by road, they could only be 2.3m wide.
• When designed, it was thought they would cost £650 each to build - but they turned out to be much more expensive because there was a shortage of people to build them, which meant they had to pay higher wages. The cost of the materials used (wood, steel and aluminium) also became more expensive.

• Prefabs actually cost between approximately £1000 and £1600 depending on their design and the company who made them.

• The prefabs were owned by the government.

• Prefabs could be built with little or no foundations. In some cases, they even rested on a pile of paving slabs.

• Prefabs were often made in four pieces (complete with their internal fittings). They were then craned into place and bolted together.

• Competitions were held to see how fast a prefab could be assembled. The record was 40 minutes!

• Prefabs were designed to include:
  
  * a fitted kitchen (with fridge, cooker and water heater)
  * an indoor bathroom with heated towel rail, toilet and boiler
  * a hot air heating system (like central heating we have today).

• They were detached, and they had gardens all around.

• Prefabs were built everywhere - from a few in the smallest villages, to large estates of 300 – 1100.

• The largest groups of prefabs were found where cities and ports had been heavily bombed.

• Some still exist today. For example, 127 prefab bungalows were refurbished in 2013 by Ipswich Council!