

West Ewell's Prefabs (1948 - 1960)



*Mr Taylor, Uncle Henry, Eric Taylor and Elaine Taylor
at the rear of 57 Gadesden Rd*

The Prefab Days, for some of us they were the happiest days of our lives! I was 2 years old in 1948 when my parents finally managed to secure a roof over our heads in Gadesden Road. We lived at 57 Gadesden Road which was up a short ally way and behind the prefabs that were on the front facing the road. I could list most of the families that lived there during that period as very few ever moved away as I recall. My dad (George Taylor), after the war found that where he used to live in London (Shoreditch) had been bombed out, so he looked for work in the Epsom & Ewell area as a brick layer and also put his name on the council housing waiting list. Before managing to secure a prefab my parents lived in Heatherside Road, West Ewell with the rest of the Taylor family in rented accommodation in completely overcrowded conditions. It caused a lot of family arguments living like that and my parents finally were allocated a prefab, 57, Gadesden Rd, much to their relief!

My first recollection of living in our prefab was when my sister Elaine was born in Jan 1950 and I was nearly 4 then. Our prefab was made of what seemed very thick cardboard and had a flat roof which was covered in tarpaulin, 2 bedrooms, a bathroom & toilet combined, front room (lounge), a hallway & kitchen. Our kitchen had the basics of a sink with running water, gas cooker and a big larder! No fridge then just a big larder near the back door to store food and keep things cool. I can remember we used to put a mouse trap in there with a small piece of cheese and nearly always caught a mouse. Every day mum would walk up to the shops in Poole Road and buy fresh vegetables and bread with some money and war coupons. Cheap meat made the stew which was on the table often with dumplings, or it would be boiled eggs with bread soldiers. Weetabix or Shredded Wheat/Puffed Wheat & Porridge for breakfast when we could afford it. All cakes and afters were all made by mum and my sister and I loved to have the skin off the custard or rice pudding, there was no wastage of food in those days, well not in our prefab.

My dad only earned £5 a week in those early days! Mum had to get a cleaning job at Ruxley Lane Primary/Infant school to help out for just over a £1 a week. Times were hard then and all clothes were repaired by mum if they got holes in and dad used to repair my shoes by putting new rubber soles on every 4 or 5 months or earlier. Sometimes we got for a few pence some of our clothes at school jumble sales which were very popular then. As there was no TV in those early days all the kids played in the road or the green and when we were a bit older we played in the little woods by the Hogsmill River and Ruxley Lane primary school. We called it the Maize and we climbed every tree in there, we knew where all the birds nests were and often we build dens or little camps under the bushes. The hours and hours of fun we all had playing Cowboys & Indians in those wooded areas up past the huge allotments and on up into Ewell Court Park. In those days we had small penknives which we used to cut sticks out the hedge or whittling sticks. Not one of us would ever contemplate using a knife against another person, didn't enter our heads. Our culture was a lot different to what is happening today I'm pleased to say.



*Trevor White, Roger Hooker and Eric Taylor
Outside 60 to 63 Gadesden Road*

On Saturdays nearly all the kids went to Saturday morning Pictures at the Rembrandt, Ewell. It would start by us all singing the 'ABC' song to get us all excited & ready for the opening cartoons! Looney Tunes & Felix the Cat. Then it would be Laurel & Hardy and Flash Gordon! Followed by a good cowboy film like Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry and Davy Crockett. Our mums would make us Davey Crockett hats which were like a 'trappers hat' but had a fox tail hanging down the back. She was always knitting my sister and me jumpers & pullovers! We also had cowboy outfits and spend hours playing cowboys & indians in the woods or in the huge open parklands of Ewell Court. Many of us used to paddle in the river Hogsmill

by the waterfalls that were there and which formed islands of stones & shingle midstream. In Spring frogspawn was everywhere in quiet eddies and bulrushes. If it wasn't cowboys and indians we played Robin Hood and his merry men making bow & arrows from branches off the trees and some string. We put a piece of clay on the front of the arrows and boy did they fly! The river used to meander from Ruxley Lane to well past Ewell Court and right up to the railway bridge in Ewell. Then these huge cranes with big buckets came and gradually dug a new river bed almost in a straight line in the mid 50's and the old river was no more. It really changed that area of open park land from the natural terrain. After all these years it has finally grown back and is almost unrecognisable.



Elaine and Eric Taylor.

As we got a bit older and stopped playing 'Hopscotch' in the road (only 3 cars in the street in those days!) we built trolleys which were made from a set of old pram wheels with a wooden plank in the middle to join them. One set of wheels were fixed at the rear and the other set had a central bolt through the plank at the front for steering. The hours of fun we all had with these flying down the road and onto the path that went across the fields to Ruxley Lane primary school. Great times as I remember. Many of us were in the 'Cubs' then became 'Scouts' and went to Camp at least twice a year where we met up with other cub & scout troops!

Nearly every family in the prefabs used to grow food (vegetables) in their gardens. This was essential in those days and many also had an allotment just down the road on the other side of the Hogsmill river near Ewell Court. All this really helped towards putting food on the table, it was organic and fresh. Runner beans, lettuce, beetroot, carrots, spring onions & potatoes to name a few. We may have all been at the poor end of society in those days but our food was fresh every day and mainly vegetables. You couldn't buy pre-made meals in those days! You made your own

apple pies or meat pies. My mum used to put a cup upside down in the middle of a stew with pastry right over and crinkled at the edges, same for the apple and rhubarb pies as well. If you didn't eat up all that was put in front of you on the table, you couldn't go out and play! That applied at school as well at lunch time. We even got a third of a pint of free milk at school just before first break, sometimes two if any were left over.



*Roger Hooker and Eric and Elaine Taylor
in an old pram in the back garden*

In winter time when the temperature was freezing outside, our bedroom windows by morning had beautiful frosted patterns on the inside and often you couldn't open the windows till later in the day. Having a flat roof you could hear birds running across the tarpaulin roof and when it rained hard the pitter patter noise was very comforting and often quite loud when stormy. The front room had a small fireplace with hinged doors which burnt coal (if you could afford it) but mainly logs or a combination of the two. Us kids often brought an old tree trunk or logs home from the woods. We used to cut a lot of the dead trees down & branches for our Bonfire on Nov 5th + all the garden waste & rubbish we could collect from our neighbours. As our fires in the prefabs were coal & wood the chimney soon got clogged with soot. I used to have to climb up on the roof as a young lad and stick a long brush down (up and down) many times and also clean the chimney pot cover which clipped onto the top of the chimney. Paper was moulded around the fireplace then the fire grate doors were shut to hold it all in. We often did this for neighbours who couldn't climb up there.

At the Queens Coronation in 1953 all the children dressed up in various guises (I was soldier, Household Cavalry) my sister was a Hula Hula girl (Hawaii). We had a big street party and there was a lot of fun for everyone involved, especially us children. You didn't have to worry about the 'Bogie Man' in those days! It was safe to

play outside and go afar, often over a mile from home and come back 3 or 4 hours later plastered in mud or a hole in your trousers or pullover. There was a mobile park keeper who had a bike and he knew all us kids as he cycled around the Ewell Court fields making sure none of us were up to mischief etc. We called him "Wandering Harry" and there were times he would give us a run for our money especially if we cheeked him! Real fun days where you made your own fun and entertainment. We even took old rags to the rag & bowman in exchange for a goldfish in a plastic bag. It usually died a week later! The Hogsmill river had a lot of Sticklebacks, frogs and newts in it and we would spend many an hour fishing with a small net and wet feet where the water had gone over our wellingtons.



Trevor White dressed up as a newspaper for the Coronation

Leading up to 'Guy Fawkes' night there would be 3 huge bonfires mainly built by us kids on the green between the two Gadesden Roads. A lot of the wood was from the Maize as we called it and anything that would burn sourced from neighbours prefabs like old chairs, boxes of rubbish & garden waste. No recycling in those days, what didn't go in the 'dustbin' got burnt! Most of the kids then made a 'Guy' and we would parade them around on the trolleys we had made. Visiting every prefab or nearby house by knocking on the door and asking, Penny for the Guy! This enabled us to buy fireworks which only cost a penny or tuppence in the days when there was 240 pence in a pound. Again happy days! You never had to worry about traffic when playing in the road as very few people could afford a car in Gadesden Rd, maybe three or four at most. We thought people were 'rich' if they had a car. A few people had motorbikes or a NSU Quickly, but peddle cycles were the main transport or the bus!

In 1960 an estate of council houses were built on Scotts Farm which was situated behind the prefabs in bottom half of Gadesden Rd. My dad helped build these 2 and

3 bedroom semi-detached houses and flats and it wasn't long before we were lucky enough to be allocated 35, Scotts Farm Road. It was a 3 bedroomed semi and I was 14 at the time attending 'Danetree Road Senior School'. My sister was 10 and at last we now both had our own bedrooms. Some of our good neighbours went to 'Longmead Estate' West Ewell or to Hollman Rd off Cox Lane/Ruxley Lane. Ruxley Lane Senior School was completed just before the Scotts Farm Estate and most kids who lived the north side went there while those on Scotts Farm & Longmead went to Danetree Rd School.

Once families had been moved out of the prefabs and had been relocated to brick built properties the prefabs were then broken up and taken away on lorries. I believe 4 or 5 were bought as holiday homes (ours was) and ended up being rebuilt somewhere on the south coast. Where the Prefabs once stood new brick housing was built so by 1961/2 the Prefabs in Gadesden Rd, Shawford Rd & Cherry Way had gone. They were history! At around the same time Gatley Avenue & Curtis Rd Prefabs were also demolished to make way for new brick constructed council houses. Many are now privately owned, as they were offered to sitting tenants at a reduced price when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. For us children who grew up between 1948-1961 and lived in those Prefabs they were the happiest days anyone could wish for. Life was hard for many folk but for the prefab children they were really happy times and I would not have swapped them for anything!

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