

Port Isaac's Prefabs



Port Isaac's 'prefabs' were put up just after the war, where the Primary school and Mayfield Drive are now. They were in use for around 25 years, being demolished 40 years ago. With over 200,000 homes destroyed during the last war, the government's thoughts turned to how to alleviate what would be a severe post-war housing shortage. In March 1944 Churchill gave a speech outlining the proposals to build 500,000 'Emergency Factory Made' temporary homes within five years of the end of the war. Churchill stated "The emergency programme is to be treated as a military evolution handled by the government with private industry harnessed in its service. As much thought will go into the prefabricated housing programme as went to the invasion of Africa." The plan subsequently adopted by the Attlee government was for 300,000 over 10 years with a budget of £150 million (ie £500 each). It was intended to utilise wartime production line facilities and build to a common standard which would speed up the construction process. There were many competing designs and the ones erected at Port Isaac were the AIROH (Aircraft Industries Research Organisation on Housing) design of a 675 square foot, ten tonne all-aluminium bungalow assembled from four sections, all fully furnished right down to the curtains, and each section delivered to the site on a lorry.

Putting up the four-section AIROH home on prepared foundations in a few hours with just a handful of men. These pre-fabricated homes were built in the old aircraft factories, which would no longer be needed once the war had ended. They utilised surplus aircraft materials, including aluminium from war-damaged planes. The proposed rate of construction was staggering, with a new

AIROH home rolling off the production line every 12 minutes! They came complete with a built in kitchen (including what was then the almost unheard of luxury of a refrigerator) and bathroom, so the delivered home just needed connection to the water, electricity and sewers and it was ready to move in. Building on site was incredibly speedy, as one was erected in May 1945 on a bomb site in London's Oxford Street in just four hours.

Of the anticipated 300,000 prefabs, 156,623 were built up to 1951, of which 54,500 were AIROH homes. One of the significant problems was the cost, which far exceeded that of a traditional home. The AIROH prefab cost £1,610, to which you have to add the price of the land on which it stood and utility infrastructure costs. The cost of the prefab was met by the Ministry of Works, but the local authority had to provide the land and infrastructure. They were only expected to be around for ten years until more permanent homes could be built, but many survived much longer than those in Port Isaac. Today, there are still a few prefab estates to be found, particularly in Bristol which has 700 surviving of various types. They are often looked upon now with great fondness as the symbol of post-war family life, and plans to demolish them can be vigorously resisted. Some are now Grade II listed buildings, and an AIROH prefab is preserved in the Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans.

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