

Memories of 14 Montgomery Gardens. East Ham. E6

In the summer of 1953, my parents, and my older brother, moved into No14 Montgomery Gardens, East Ham, E6. On the 1st of November that year, I joined the household and, with the addition of a sister just a few years later, we would remain there as a family until 1968. Although initially put up as temporary buildings during, and after WW2, many would last for decades beyond their intended lifetime.

Montgomery Gardens was one of several cul-de-sacs on the Eisenhower Drive estate. The estate was located halfway along the Becton Road, on the north side; sandwiched between the Becton Road and East Ham by-pass. This was a large area of industrial wasteland probably owned by The Becton Gasworks Company. Quite a remote location given that these estates would normally be within, or near, an existing residential area. The estate, and all the cul-de-sacs within, were named after British WW2 Generals; as shown on the map.

Looking back, I can now see we were technically the poor of the parish. In the 1950s my mother was a stay at home mum, and my dad worked long days as a motor lorry driver/motor mechanic in Silvertown. But as children, we were not aware of the social distinctions that society used, and we were very happy with our lot. We were blessed with loving parents who were determined that their children would go on to get a good education and make something of their lives. They had lived through a terrible World War, my father spending it in the jungles of Burma, and so the peace and tranquillity of the prefab estate was no doubt wonderful.

No 14 was a corner plot and enjoyed a large garden backing on to the open fields that surrounded the estate. These fields, criss-crossed by drainage ditches and home to numerous swamps, would be the adventure playground for the many children of the estate. The garden of No14 was soon increased in size by incorporating that of an elderly neighbour in Bertram Gardens, who did not have the time or inclination for gardening.

Our mother, having served in the Women's Land Army, was a keen gardener and set about making the most of the garden by growing as many vegetables as she could. No doubt also helping the household economy. We all took part in the seasonal digging, planting and maintenance. Our reward was to have fresh veg for our Sunday roast dinners.

The estate had a central area containing four shop units. One was a newsagent and grocers, one was a butcher, another an off-licence and the final one became a mini supermarket. How these businesses survived by relying almost solely on the estate for customers is a mystery. They did change hands often and were closed for periods of time. Only Bill, at the newsagents, seemed to survive through it all. Here you could also find the only telephone box and mailbox.

At the north end of Eisenhower Drive was the Community Centre. This served as a clinic where I recall the many vaccinations of my childhood took place; as well as other medical requirements under the fledgling National Health Service. There were also some admin offices as well as the community hall. This saw Christmas dinners and a Christmas Panto performance put on for the children of the estate. Parents put 3d a week into a fund for each child to have a place at the celebrations.

The children of Eisenhower Drive estate would all attend the Roman Road Junior Mixed and Infants School in Roman Road; located just over the by-pass. A temporary scaffold bridge got the children safely over the by-pass; though temporary, it would not be replaced until the area

was developed in the 1970s. Eisenhower Drive would survive as a road but all the other names would be lost.

Our prefab was built to the design of the Tarran Mk4. The prefabs were, for their day, fully fitted with modern conveniences. The kitchen had a built-in oven and hob, a boiler for washing, and an integrated refrigerator. Other than the occasional hob plate replacement, the cooker and fridge worked for the duration of the fifteen years we lived there. The boiler was replaced with a washing machine with integrated mangle.

The fire in the lounge ran a back-boiler for hot water, although an immersion could be switched on if more hot water was required. With the electrical bill always in mind, the immersion was a switch of last resort. The only heating, other than the coal fire, would be an electrical two-bar fire or a paraffin heater located in the hallway. Even as a young child, monitoring the flame in the paraffin heater, and topping up as required, was just a regular chore to be carried out.

The prefab included numerous storage cupboards in most rooms. The toilet was separated and located at the end of the hallway. The bathroom backed onto the kitchen which was no doubt a way of centralising the services. The demolition photos show that the foundation was built with services already in place in the centre of the site.

Although the prefab was compact, a small table in the kitchen was sufficient for us to eat at every day, with my dad having it to himself later, as he was rarely home before 7pm. A larger extending dining table and chairs were located in the living room for larger events and special occasions. It would be many years before a small television would appear in the sitting room and a telephone would not arrive until we moved to the new home in 1968.

Many years before the advent of cheap motoring, the estate saw little or no traffic other than milk floats, dust carts, and the occasional horse and cart. This meant children could safely play out on carts and bicycles without parents worrying. Our father's motorbike and sidecar was one of the few vehicles to park in the road; though this would eventually change as we moved into the 1960s. Cars became a little more common and we eventually, after three different motorcycle combinations and an old Ford 10cwt van, became the proud owners of a used Ford Consul MK2.

That part of my life, spent living in Montgomery Gardens, is remembered with great affection. Nostalgia can add a rosy glow to the past, but those days really were enjoyable and will remain with me always.

Regards

David

Mr D J Davenport