The Swedish Houses

New Website for Stinchcombe Local History is www.StinchcombeHistory.org.uk



View of Stinchcombe's Swedish Houses from the cricket pitch

Heritage under threat

This is the first house history on this website where the subject is under threat. Stroud District Council's Housing Department wants to demolish both pairs of Swedish Houses in Stinchcombe and redevelop the site. They plan about 16 dwellings and associated parking. Read more about their plans here. ADD LINK TO TRUDY'S POST

Stinchcombe History Society hopes that reading the history of these unusual houses will help people understand why we are so desperate to preserve them. If you agree that they should be saved, please take every opportunity to say so!

The Post-WII Housing Crisis

The current housing crisis is not the first. As WWII drew to a close, it was clear that there was a housing shortage in Britain. Many homes had been destroyed or badly damaged by bombing and the birth rate was increasing. In 1944, Winston Churchill promised ‘up to half a million’ prefabricated houses. That target wasn’t achieved, but there was a major building programme. Eventually 156,623 ‘prefabs’ were built in eleven different standard government designs.



Nursery Schoolchildren c,1940, public domain

The Gloucester Citizen of 23rd February 1945 carries an announcement on housing policy by the Minister of Works. The original programme of temporary houses is no longer possible because factory capacity and labour are unavailable and there are shortages of materials, including timber and sheet steel. The Government was turning to less highly fabricated types of houses, even though these required more man-hours on site and were considerably more expensive.

Enter the Swedish Houses as part of an additional temporary housing programme for ‘permanent prefabs’. Only around 5,000 were constructed across England, Scotland and Wales. Unlike the Government prefabs, they tended to be constructed in one

or two pairs. Due to the fire risk, they were located on the edge of villages and often in open fields.

A Purchase not a Gift

The Swedes had used prefabricated timber housing since the mid-C19, however, it was something new in Britain. It is often wrongly stated that the houses were a gift from a grateful Swedish Government. In fact, they were purchased by the Ministry of Works.

The houses were specially designed for British conditions and tastes. There were four types of which only Type A (semi-detached two-storey houses) and Type D (dormer bungalows) were used in England. Our houses in Stinchcombe are Type D. Examples of Type A can be seen at The Knoll, off South Street in Uley. These are also under threat of demolition and redevelopment.



Type A Swedish Houses at The Knoll in Uley

The traditional proportions of the Swedish Houses made them very different from the asbestos, concrete and steel prefab bungalows. They were intended to house labourers in rural

areas, including ex-servicemen being retrained for the agricultural sector.

The Arrival of the Swedish Houses

From the start, Swedish prefabricated timber houses attracted considerable interest in Gloucestershire. A free photographic exhibition in Cheltenham Art Gallery in August/September 1945 was devoted to the topic. The arrival at Hull docks of the timber sections for the first four houses was reported in the Gloucestershire Echo on 25th September 1945.



Canning Town, London, showing workmen amongst the piled raw materials used in the construction of Swedish Housing Historic England Ref. P/H00001/007



The interior of a storage hangar, showing rows of stacked prefabricated housing components, at a Ministry of Works

distribution centre RAF Squires Gate, Blackpool Historic England Ref. P/H00078/007

The arrival of the houses in our area was awaited with impatience. In June 1946, our local MP Flight Lieut. Parkin, asked Aneurin Bevan, Minister of Health, how many Swedish houses had been allocated to Dursley Rural Council. He also wanted to know how many had been delivered and when, how many erected and what was preventing the erection of the rest.

Mr Bevan replied that sixteen houses had been allocated and all the timber sections had been delivered between 4th March and 6th April. None had yet been erected, but work was beginning at Uley. Tenders for the erection of the remaining houses, including those at Stinchcombe, had been submitted to him that very week.

By the summer the houses are being finished. For example, in the Gloucester Citizen of 13th July 1946 the Clerk of Dursley Rural Council invites tenders for the electrical installations to sixteen Swedish houses (four each in Stinchcombe, Uley, North Nibley and Wotton-under-Edge).

Ahead of their time

All prefabs provided good quality, temporary accommodation. At that time fitted kitchens, bathrooms with an indoor lavatory and running hot were luxuries for ordinary people. The Swedish Houses had additional advantages.

Specialist publication ‘The Builder’ noted that the timber-clad Swedish Houses had excellent insulation ‘about twice that of brick’. It also observed that, unlike the standard prefabs, they were intended to have a lifespan of ‘no less than 60 years’. Furthermore, they had about 1/3 more floor space than the standard prefabs.

According to Historic England, the influence of the Swedish timber prefabricated house has lasted to the present day,

particularly in eco-living and ***Passivhaus*** designs. We know from local residents and from posts on websites like ***Prefab Museum*** that people still loving living in them.

What were they like when new?

Such was the interest in the Swedish Houses, that lots of photographs were taken. These include the construction process and interior and exterior shots of completed houses. A small selection is shown below and the full collection can be seen ***here***. Perhaps it's because I'm getting old, but some of the labourers look like children!

The houses were constructed on pre-prepared brick bases with timber frames clad in prefabricated vertical tongue and grove panels of Baltic pine. Based on early photographs of different locations, the colour of the cladding appears to have varied. The Stinchcombe houses retain their original black finish, which seems to have been the most common.



Construction of a Swedish Type D prefabricated house, showing workmen at the ground floor level, for the Ministry of Works, at an unknown location Historic England P/H00137/008



The construction of a Swedish Type D prefabricated house, showing workmen adding interior, dividing panels, for the Ministry of Works, at an unknown location Historic England Ref. P/H00137/019



A general view of workmen adding roof joists during the construction of a Swedish Type D prefabricated house, for the Ministry of Works, at an unknown location Historic England Ref. P/H00137/03

As with other prefabs, the Swedish House had what was then an ultra-modern kitchen and bathroom.



The kitchen of a completed prefabricated Swedish House Type D for the Ministry of Works, at Abbots Langley, Hertfordshire, showing storage cupboards and stove
Historic England Ref. P/H00054/027



The bathroom suite of a completed prefabricated Swedish House

Type D for the Ministry of Works, at Abbots Langley, Hertfordshire, showing bathtub, sink and toilet
Historic England Ref. P/H00054/029

What original features have been retained?

The houses in Stinchcombe are unusual in that their setting is practically unchanged. No newer housing has grown up around them as it has in most places. We think this makes them rather special. On a road that showcases centuries of Stinchcombe's history they beautifully represent the post-war period and are included in our ***Heritage Walk***.

The following comments relate to 1 & 2 The Avenue which have been empty for 5-6years. It is sad to see visible signs of neglect on their exteriors. The 2009 photograph shows them when still occupied and in much better condition.



Side elevation of Swedish House at 1, The Avenue showing effects of neglect



1&2 The Avenue in 2009

The canopy porches at the front and back have not been altered. The front porches still have the built-in bench. The plain concrete tile roof appears to be largely original. Three brick chimney stacks are shown in images of other Type D houses. Sadly, only the central stack remains visible from the outside on our houses.



Canopy porch and built-in bench at 1, The Avenue

The wooden outer frames of all the windows appear to have been kept, however, uPVC windows have been fitted within them. The front and back doors are also uPVC. This has happened at most

surviving Swedish Houses. The older photographs of the Swedish Houses in Stinchcombe show the original windows and doors. SDC refused us access to photograph the interiors so we do not know to what extent the houses retain their original internal plan, fixtures and fittings. Sadly, none of the former residents that we contacted was able to supply photographs of the interiors.

The Occupants

The four houses in Stinchcombe appear in the electoral register from 1948. The first occupants were families from the local area, who all remained there until at least the 1960s.

The Talboys

Barbara and Norman Talboys started out at No.2 when it was new. Their daughter, Margaret Powell, still lives locally. She recalls living at No.3, which is certainly where the family were by the early 1960s. Margaret had three brothers so there were six people in total.

Margaret explained that the little room on the side of each house was a utility room with a partitioned off coal storage area. This room was connected to a kitchen and seating area at the rear of the house. The front room downstairs was a bedroom and there were two further bedrooms upstairs. There was a toilet off the hallway.

Our oldest photograph of the Swedish Houses, taken in a hard winter around 1980, was supplied by Margaret.



No.s 1&2 in the snow c.1980, courtesy of Margaret Powell

The Whites

Gladys and William White were the first tenants at No.3. Margaret Powell remembers that Mr White was on a boat involved in the Severn Bridge tragedy and lost his life. We have not been able to confirm that in accounts of the various accidents that occurred around that time.

The Summers

Desmond and Gwendoline Summers lived at No.4 from new until at least 1964. We've been in touch with their niece and nephew, Judith and Paul. They in turn contacted their cousin, Jean.

Jean Summers and Margaret Talboys were friends as little girls growing up at No.3 and No.4. They used to talk to one another through the central chimney breast in their respective bedrooms.

A bench on the grass verge in front of the houses was presented by Stinchcombe Silver Band in memory of Des Summers, one of the first occupants.



Plaque on bench in front of the Swedish Houses

No.4 is now privately owned and is the much-loved home of the Beesons, who have been there for 27 years. Naturally, they have adapted it to suit their own needs and would like to extend it further. No.3 is still owned by SDC and currently has a tenant.

The Gerrishes

The first occupants of No.1 were Eileen and Dennis Gerrish. We haven't been able to find out anything about them other than that they were there until at least 1964.

A lady called Alison was the most recent occupant from No.1 and we are hoping to hear more from her.

What can be done to save our Swedish Houses

Historic England do not class Swedish prefabricated houses as a rare building type. Only one pair is listed: a Type D at ***Nos 9 & 11 Ellers Lane, Doncaster.***

Attempts to get the houses in Uley listed in 2018 and, more recently, the unoccupied houses in Stinchcombe have come to nothing. Historic England suggest that we pursue local designation. Stroud District Council published a ***Heritage Strategy*** in 2018 and updated it in 2020. Unfortunately, it has still not produced the promised Action Plan part of the strategy, which makes it difficult to know how to proceed. We will do our best to find a way.

Sympathetic residents and organisations can object to the proposed development when the planning application is eventually lodged. This stage is likely to be at least 18 months off. We need to make sure that those objections are well-founded and really hit home. The Parish Council has already made it clear to Stroud District Council that it is against redevelopment and would prefer the houses to be sensitively restored to modern standards. We are pleased to say that we have the support of the ***Twentieth Century Society*** thanks to Trudy’s efforts.

SAVE OUR SWEDISH HOUSES!