

Cast Iron Houses

These houses were built in 1925 at 112 and 114 Birmingham Road Dudley - not far from the large Tesco's Supermarket today. They were occupied until September 1987 when Health Inspectors said they had to be demolished.

After the end of World War One, the National Government published a report and guidelines to encourage the building of more housing for the working classes with much better design, comfort and convenience, thus influencing the external and internal layout and fittings of these houses.

They are examples of an experiment in prefabrication and although many more cast iron houses were planned in Dudley in the end only four were built because they proved to be too expensive.

The local iron industry was short of work and there was also a shortage of local skilled labour because of the war, so using pre-formed cast iron to build the houses seemed a practical solution. Metal clad houses could be bolted together on site and these houses were put together by 4 men in just one week.

They are made up of 600 panels and 14 tons of cast iron. The inside was lined with asbestos sheets and the cavities were filled with compressed waste wool known as 'sprag'.

The roof is tiled with blue traditional Welsh slates.

Because the houses were costly to build (about £1000.00 - a sum worth about £33,000 in today's money) the rent charged was 10 to 12 shillings a week (worth about £16/17 today), which was far too expensive for most ordinary working people.

The outside of the house had to be (and is still) painted every two to three years to stop the metal deteriorating or corroding. It is a light colour to deflect the heat in summer.

Inside the house the rooms were comfortable and light with 'advanced' facilities for their time.

Instead of an outside toilet down the yard, which can be seen for example in Pitts Cottage, these houses had an indoor bathroom with a flush toilet requiring a sewer system underground. The boiler behind the kitchen range provided hot water for the bathroom and the kitchen sink.

The front room is spacious and south facing, looking out on to the road. Note the 3 piece suite made of Rexine, a kind of synthetic leather once very popular because it was cheap but smart-looking. The room is meant to be a proper sitting room, where visitors would be received, rather than the traditional 'parlour'; however, families who lived there still tended to sit in the kitchen as their families had done in the past.

There is gas lighting in all the downstairs rooms. The gas meter was under the stairs where the sewing

machine was also kept. For washing day there is a mangle outside the back door into the garden where vegetables were grown.

The shed in the back garden was used as a printer's workshop, the presses and metal type rescued by the museum from a house in Bilston, and were used to print posters, business cards, sporting fixtures, raffle tickets, etc. Printing was a popular hobby at this time and one of many ways to supplement the weekly wage working from home.

Although more iron clad houses were planned no more than the original 4 erected in 1925 and 1927 were built as traditional bricks became more available and the cost of pig iron increased.