Prefabricated Palaces

They were supposed to last just 10 years, but more than 70 years on, many of Britain’s prefabs are still standing, much loved and lived in. These factory-made temporary homes were constructed at the close of World War II, with more than 156,000 erected from 1946-1948 all over the UK to rehouse those who had lost their homes during the Blitz and servicemen coming back from the frontline.

“I wouldn’t swap my prefab for Buckingham Palace, even if it included the Queen,” prefab owner Eddie O’Mahony used to say. O’Mahony had lived in his South London prefab on the Excalibur Estate in Catford from 1946 until his death in 2015 and nobody could have made him move out of his “little castle”.

“They were luxury,” he said, “we had constant running water, inside toilets, a fridge, a hall where there was space for a pram and even a hot towel rail in the bathroom.” The homes were also detached, which was quite a novelty for people who were used to living in old tenement blocks or Victorian terraces, sometimes with other family members squeezed into just one or two rooms, with toilets outside and no running water.

Adding to the luxury, each prefab had its very own garden. “Because of the lack of cars, we were free to roam all over the estate,” recalls Alan Brine, who grew up on the Excalibur Estate in the 1950s. “All the kids played games. We had a large mosquito net that we used as a tent in the garden and we had sleepovers – security was never an issue.” Gardens also had a practical use. As rationing lasted until 1954, owners used their gardens to grow all sorts of fruits and vegetables. Slowly society changed and gardening evolved into a community hobby rather than a necessity. The estate layouts, with footpaths, alleys and low fences, were ideal for peering over at the neighbours’ efforts and arousing a healthy sense of competition. Gardens were a source of pride, with the best layouts and ornamental flower beds garnering prizes – O’Mahony was the happy winner of a few of them.
Prefabs enabled a new way of life with all the mod cons, and embodied what architects call “good design” – in essence, a clever and efficient use of space. They usually comprised a comfortable single-storey bungalow with two bedrooms, inside toilets, constant hot water, a fitted kitchen with a fridge and a cooker, built-in cupboards in every room, large windows, a coal fire and, for some of them, a coal shed outside.

1. Write a quote from the text that suggests that Eddie OMahony almost felt like a member of royalty when he first moved into his prefab.

2. Which word said by Eddie suggested that he felt that prefabs were an extremely comfortable place to live?

3. List all the things that made living in a prefab so much better than living in an old tenement block or Victorian terrace.

4. Which phrase suggests prefab housing was very up-to-date at the time?