

by Antonia Hoyle

FOR years, they were synonymous with accommodation that placed functionality and financial prudence firmly above style. But this week the humble prefab — a house manufactured offsite in kit form — is being touted as a solution to our current housing crisis.

Treasury chief secretary Steve Barclay announced a 'flat pack' strategy as part of its upcoming spending review to address Britain's infrastructure plans.

Barclay stressed that prefabricated houses have improved dramatically since the post-war period, when more than 156,000 flimsy single-storey properties were put up.

Quick to assemble and often cheaper than bricks and mortar, he suggested we take inspiration from Sweden, where 84 per cent of new homes are now prefab — compared with 5 per cent here.

So could the unglamorous prefab really prove the unlikely saviour of our accommodation crisis?

For 14 months, the Mail has followed the fortunes of the Buckland family — Gary, 48, Emma, 46, and sons Josh, 14, and Louis, 12 — as they attempted to turn their long-held dream of building a high-end prefab house into a reality. How have they fared? Hold on to your hard hats...

THE PERFECT PLOT... WITH A MOULDY PROBLEM

UNLIKE most people, Emma has long known prefab houses don't have to be functional affairs, having grown up in one. In 1979, her parents were one of the first British families to buy a prefab home from Scandinavian company Scandia-Hus — which specialises in high-end timber frame prefabs and launched here in the 1970s.

'I loved the enormous windows, effective insulation and wood everywhere,' says Emma, a solicitor. 'I've always wanted our family home to be a prefab too.'

The problem was finding a plot on which to build it. When Gary and Emma — who met as neighbours in Brighton and married in 2003 — found the perfect 0.4-acre plot in Ditchling, a picturesque village by the South Downs, in July 2016, there was already a 1,000-square-foot decrepit bungalow on it.

'Our plan was to repair and extend the bungalow,' says Gary, who owns a book publishing company.

By that Christmas, however, the couple — who paid £645,000 for the property — had changed their minds. 'We hadn't realised how bad a condition it was in,' says Gary. 'It was damp, mouldy and smelly.'

After commissioning architects the following April, he recalls: 'Emma asked if their proposals for extra insulation would stop the mould. They said they "couldn't guarantee it". We called Scandia-Hus that afternoon.'

In addition to the aesthetics, Emma and Gary were attracted by the lower environmental impact of prefabs — because the frames are built to specific measurements, waste and the number of builders required are reduced. And, while you used to order from a catalogue, you can now design bespoke ones.

By late 2017, they had finalised their designs for a 2,300-square-foot, two-storey, five-bedroom home. The basic Scandia-Hus kit — which included the timber frame, windows, insulation, and load-bearing walls — cost £200,000.

The couple allocated a further £300,000 for the rest of the works, including the foundations, other



Demolished: The dilapidated bungalow (left) and (above) the cabin the family lived in during the build



House in pieces: Emma and Gary with some of the parts for their home



Speedy progress: The ground floor walls went up in just a day

Now THAT'S a flatpack...how one family survived life in a cabin, building heartache and a stretched budget to replace a dilapidated bungalow with a glorified Lego set now worth £1.5m

# We made our PREFAB ULTIMOUS dream come true

At last: Gary and Emma with sons Josh and Louis outside their new home



Space to spread out: Gary and Emma in their slick new kitchen

CABIN FEVER IN THEIR TEMPORARY HOME

IN MARCH 2019, Gary spent £30,000 on a tiny, 480-square-foot wooden cabin for the garden — their home until the prefab was finished.

'We wanted to stay on site for security and to save money,' he says. With a carpenter's help, he transferred the bungalow's bathroom and kitchen into the basic cabin, which 'just about' had two bedrooms. 'We had to saw the end off the boys' bunk beds to fit them in.'

With no carpets and one minuscule living area, conditions were cosy to say the least. 'Our youngest son is a Doctor Who obsessive, but not all of us wanted to watch it all the time,' says Emma. 'Gary and I couldn't watch a film of our own because the walls were paper thin.'

Yet at first the overwhelming feeling was excitement. 'We were close enough to be able to live and breathe the project,' says Gary.

MUD, GLORIOUS MUD — AND BIG BILLS ROLL IN

IN JUNE 2019, the bungalow was emptied and demolished in three days. Gary admits: 'It was a strange feeling knocking down a house we'd paid so much money for.'

Meanwhile, the prefab frame was being constructed in Scandia-Hus's East Grinstead factory. It took a month for hundreds of wood panels and steel joists to be cut to measure. 'It was exciting to guess what panel would go where,' says Gary — who hoped they would have moved in by this March.

Unfortunately, back on site, the foundations dug that month were deemed unstable by building inspectors on account of a willow tree in the garden. The disappointed couple were told to, literally, dig deeper — a process that took six further weeks and several thousand pounds out of their budget. Gary says: 'It felt like we'd stumbled at the first hurdle.'

Morale was further challenged by the 300 tonnes of clay excavated for the new 6ft-deep, steel-reinforced foundations. It covered every inch of the garden. The drive was too narrow to accommodate a big lorry, so it took 200 small truckloads to remove the debris. This added an extra £5,000 to the bill.

There were two upsides, however: debris from the bungalow was crushed to fill the new foundations, meaning it was effectively recycled, while the finished foundations comprised a giant concrete slab that was briefly 'the perfect table tennis arena for the boys'.

FRAME GOES UP AS RAIN COMES DOWN

LAST September, the prefab kit was delivered in 16 truckloads that took a team of six builders three-and-a-half weeks to assemble.

The entire ground floor was nailed, bolted and glued together in just a week. By the end of day one, Gary says, 'the ground floor walls were up and we started to get a feel for the layout of the house. It was the most exciting part of the process'.

In the second week, the first floor was constructed, and after three-and-a-half weeks the roof — which

arrived in eight sections — had been hoisted on with a crane. Then the windows arrived. Triple-glazed, some were so heavy they had to be fitted by all six men.

Exciting progress, then. But by autumn, the weather had turned, the family had been living in their cabin for six months and Gary was spending every available moment overseeing the project. Surely tempers had started to fray?

'We didn't argue,' insists Gary. Meanwhile, Emma says problems were compounded by the endless rain that flooded the site, pouring mud into their temporary home. 'We'd have to wade through water to get from our car to the cabin. I'd wear wellies with my suit on my way to court. It was awful.'

Visualising their dream home was essential. 'We kept a picture of the

glass showers, a huge kitchen island and two ovens. 'I wanted one for sweet and one for savoury food so my cakes didn't smell of garlic,' says Emma, who admits she felt spoilt by her choices.

FRUSTRATION SETS IN AS PLANS ARE DELAYED

OVER the winter the timber frame was strengthened with a concrete covering before being rendered. A chipboard floor was fitted and internal walls erected before Gary spent six weeks meticulously fitting high-grade insulation.

By this stage, Emma admits frustration. 'I did have to bite my tongue. I was taking care of the children, cooking, cleaning and doing a stressful job, while Gary was merrily talking to the workmen over a beer at the end of the day.'

By February, both realised that building plans always take longer than expected. 'I resigned myself to the fact we wouldn't be moving in March,' says Gary. Neither, however, could anticipate the chaos around the corner...

CURIOUS CASE OF THE MISSING STAIRS

AS LOCKDOWN looked imminent, Gary cancelled all his tradesmen apart from carpenter Dave, who continued to work alone wearing a mask. The sparking new kitchen due to be delivered, meanwhile, was stuck in a warehouse.

'It was locked there for six weeks until we hired two brothers from a removal company — allowed to work together because they lived together — to collect it in May,' says Gary.

Then their £8,000 ash stairway went missing for four weeks. 'Finally a man turned up with a lorry and the glass side panels. He thought the rest had been sent to Wales. But it was never found.'

Instead, the manufacturers spent three weeks building another staircase while Gary put his day job on hold to spend 60-odd hours a week on site.

Emma, home-schooling from the cabin, however, was at her wit's end. Her father, Tony, who had advised the couple throughout, was increasingly ill with cancer. 'Working from home while the boys studied on our one tiny table was disruptive, and caring for my father emotionally exhausting. Cracks started to show.'

'Sometimes I just wanted to stop it all and escape. By May it got too much and my manager suggested I take time off work.'

Their project became bittersweet this Father's Day, when Emma's dad paid his last visit to the nearly completed house. 'It was lovely he got to see it,' says Emma. He passed away on July 2, aged 76.

SO WAS ALL THE HARD WORK WORTH IT?

THEY finally moved in on June 23 — 14 months after they decamped to the cabin, four years after buying the plot and almost £1.2million later. On their first evening, Emma made beef fajitas to celebrate. 'It was lovely to have room to make a mess while cooking, to have a huge bed and massive glass windows. It's beautiful here.'

After four years, the boys finally have their own bedrooms. 'In the cabin it was difficult to get them off their screens, but suddenly they reverted to shooting their Lego cars up and down the hallway as they had done when they were tiny,' says Gary.

This wasn't a whirlwind project. But they believe their prefab is more sustainable, energy efficient and stylish than many conventional homes. Not to mention Gary estimates it's worth £1.5million.

'It's been the realisation of our 20-year dream,' he says. 'I don't see the downside of a prefab house.'