On a fast track to an eco home

ADRIAN PEEL finds out about a remarkable house built in just three days as Cambridge’s Open Eco Homes event goes online for 2020.

After 10 years of live events, Open Eco Homes has gone online with its home tours that aim to help and inspire Cambridgeshire homeowners to take their next green step.

Running until October 20, the event includes one-hour tours of homes from across the county that have already embraced green technology. The homeowners lead the tours, giving viewers an opportunity to find out about their stories – including the real world benefits of the changes they have made and, remarkably, how you can build a new house in just three days.

If you think last statement sounds a bit far-fetched, then you’ll need to join Cambridge couple Adrian and Judy Reith for their guided tour.

“We lived in a family house in central Cambridge and raised our three children,” said Judy. “Near the house there was a site with 20 old garages that were in a bad state of repair and were actually a local problem because of drug-taking and homeless issues.

“Adrian wrote every year to the bursar of the college that owned the garages to ask if they had any plans to develop the site, and for seven years in a row it was, ‘No, you can’t buy this off us’.” Then we ended up deciding that we would sell our house to move somewhere smaller because our kids were leaving and we needed less space – and that was the time they said, ‘Okay, come in and have a chat’. We did the deal and bought the site with no planning permission. It’s not the kind of thing which a lot of people would have taken on.

“We then spent a year in discussion with the planners and with an architect and very quickly decided we were going to go with a German company, Baufritz, which had a system where they manufactured the house in a factory in Germany.”

Judy says the council even went behind their ambitious plan, adding: “We got plenty of support to build the house, and in fact the council said we should see a house like this as a new classic for Cambridge.”

The home comes with plenty of environmentally-friendly credentials.

Adrian said: “Baufritz said really what you need is just a very well-insulated house.

“It was put together very well – the engineering is really top-quality. The house was made in a factory by robots – designed by humans but actually created by little machines. So it means that they can make it perform much better as a machine for living in. It’s so much cheaper to run – it’s a third of what we used to pay, in terms of bills."

Adrian continued: “We’ve got solar panels on the roof, all the windows are triple-glazed, and the other thing is a really interesting feature about Baufritz is that they want to build healthy houses so they make sure there’s no CFCs and PVC, hydrocarbon and things like that which are given off inside the house.

“The paints don’t give off chemicals – they’ve tested all that stuff, so it feels like a very healthy place to be.”

The couple, who published a book together earlier this year – Act 3: The Art of Growing Older – have previously given tours of their house as part of Open Cambridge but this year the tour will be virtual.

Recalling how the house was built five years ago, Adrian said: “The ground was broken in the January and a concrete slab was put there, and then Baufritz turned up in April and assembled the house on the site in three days – from nothing to completely watertight. It is a pretty dramatic thing.

“You can’t move in at that point – you’ve got a few months of sorting out the insides, the plumbing and the wiring and putting the kitchen and the floors in, but the actual house was built in three days.”

Organised by Cambridge Carbon Footprint, with support from Cambridge City Council and the Cambridge Forum for the Construction Industry, Open Eco Homes passes on experiences, both good and bad, so others can choose and implement home energy improvements that suit them.

Organiser Tom Bragg said: “With people spending so much time at home recently, there’s new demand to improve them. Visitors to the Open Eco Homes autumn season will learn how to save energy, make their home more comfortable and reduce their carbon emissions.

“People are more likely to make improvements themselves if they see it working for real in someone else’s beautiful comfortable home.”