

PART 5

You are going to read a book review. For questions 31–36, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text.

Mark your answers on the separate answer sheet.

## The Great Indoors: At Home in the Modern British House by Ben Highmore

In 1910 the music hall comedian Billy Williams scored his biggest hit with the song *When Father Papered the Parlour*, mocking the incompetence of the amateur home decorator. Fifty years later, comedians Norman Wisdom and Bruce Forsyth were still entertaining millions on the TV show *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* with a similar routine, but the joke was starting to look dated. The success of magazines such as *The Practical Householder* was already proving that, as the 1957 Ideal Home Exhibition proclaimed, 'Do-it-yourself is a home hobby that is here to stay.'

By this stage, Britain had mostly completed its transition from primitive housing conditions, made bearable – for those who could afford it – by servants and handymen, into a world where families looked after themselves in highly serviced environments. Recognisably modern technology, in the form of telephones, televisions and electricity, had become ubiquitous and was to transform domestic living still further in the coming years. The makeover of British homes in the twentieth century is recounted in Ben Highmore's entertaining and informative new book. He takes us on a whirlwind tour of an everyday house, from entrance hall to garden shed, illuminated by extensive reference to oral histories, popular magazines and personal memoirs.

At its centre, though, is the way that our homes have reflected wider social changes. There is the decline of

formality, so that living rooms once full of heavy furniture and Victorian knick-knacks are now dominated by television screens and littered with children's toys. There is a growing internationalism in taste. And there is the rise of domestic democracy, with the household radiogram and telephone (located in the hall) now replaced by iPads, laptops and mobiles in virtually every room. Key to that decentralization of the home – and the implied shift of power within it – is the advent of central heating, which gets pride of place as the innovation that allowed the whole house to become accessible at all times of day and night. Telling an unruly child to 'go to your room' no longer seems much of a threat.

Highmore also documents, however, some less successful steps in the onward march of domestic machinery. Whatever happened to the gas-powered fridges we were promised in 1946? Or to the Dishmaster a decade later that promised to do 'a whole day's washing up in just three minutes'? Rather more clear is the reason why a 1902 Teasmade failed to catch on: 'when the alarm clock triggered the switch, a match was struck, lighting a spirit stove under the kettle'. You don't have to be a health and safety fanatic to conclude that a bedroom isn't the ideal place for such a gadget.

Equally disturbing to the modern reader is the pre-war obsession with children getting fresh air. It was a belief so entrenched that even a

voice of dissent merely argued that in winter, 'The healthy child only needs about three hours a day in the open air, as long as the day and night nursery windows are always open.' Nowadays, the fresh air obsession has been replaced by irrational fears of horrors outside the home. It's easier to laugh at the foibles of the past, and Highmore doesn't always resist a sense of modern superiority, though, for the most part, he's an engaging and quirky guide, dispensing sociological insights without jargon.

The message is that even the language of the home has changed irrevocably: airing cupboards are going the same way as drawing rooms. As for that Billy Williams song, 'By the 1980s', Highmore writes, 'it would be impossible for anyone to imagine their front room as a "parlour" without seeming deeply old-fashioned.' He's not entirely correct, for there was at least one person who was still employing such terminology. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sold her message with the use of what she called 'the parables of the parlour', which suggests she understood the truth that, despite the catalogue of changes, there is a core that seems consistent. A 1946 edition of *Housewife* magazine spelt it out: 'men make houses, women make homes'. When you watch a male comedian today doing a routine about his wife's attachment to scatter cushions, it seems worth asking: has the family dynamic really moved a great deal?