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# Take a good look

## Beyond the brochure

Who might live in a house like this? Leave your preconceptions at the door

**W**hen it comes to property, I sometimes think we are more boxed in by expectations than by bricks and mortar. Take me, for example. A few months ago, I moved into an ex-local-authority flat on the edge of an enormous estate in Bethnal Green, east London. It is, without question, the most hideous building I've ever lived in. On a good day, in the sunshine and with a warm breeze tickling the blossom, it looks like a low-security prison in North Korea. On a bad day, it still looks like a North Korean prison, only in the rain.

What they call "kerb appeal" is in scant evidence. When my mother came round for the first time, I found her hiding in the back of a taxi, having sent the driver to ring the bell because she was too scared to go out herself. As we walked up to the flat — along an external corridor festooned with detritus from fast-food eateries — she had a look of despairing fear reminiscent of Sarah Lancashire's performance in *Happy Valley*.

But here's the thing: it's nice living here. For a start, I'm only 10 minutes from the West End on the Tube, and there's a pretty Victorian park a stone's throw away. The whole neighbourhood has "come up" and seems to be peddling artisanal croissants, if you go in for that sort of thing. More excitingly, I have neighbours who rarely make a peep, so it's brilliantly quiet for semi-central London. Once you get inside, the solid 1950s build is actually quite charming and, with nice furniture in, it looks fab. Also — let's not kid ourselves about what really matters — it was a steal.

Does it sound like I'm justifying it too much? I reckon it does, but only because of the weird and visceral expectations we attach to each other's homes in Britain. We see a property and instantly imagine a person. Mine apparently suggests I have a penchant for tossing fast-food boxes out of my front door. Which is cool, I can live with that. I've been accused of worse. And, on the upside, having shaken off the fallacy that you have to live in a period conversion or a gleaming new-build to be happy, I feel much freer. It has opened up my property horizons loads.

Or so I thought until I went to visit the Old Rectory, in Knights Enham, Hampshire. "Talk about a facade," I thought, thumbing through the brochure on the train. The gleaming limestone Queen Anne frontage is straight out of Jane Austen, nestled on a driveway and



It's the perfect family home, with an acre of gardens and the oldest, tallest Queen Anne staircase in the country



## The Old Rectory, Knights Enham, Hampshire, £1.1m

**What you get** The perfect English dream of a country house, with five bedrooms and surround sound  
**Who to call** Knight Frank, 01488 682726, knightfrank.co.uk



next door to a 12th-century church. I'd spoken on the phone to the rather clipped-sounding Mr Davies, who is selling up, to arrange a time to visit, and imagined a stern brigadier type with a pushy wife who could name 20 Farrow & Ball colours off the top of her head.

Which would have been fine had I not been to the gym and forgotten to bring a change of clothes. The train pulled into Andover and, wearing shorts, day-glo trainers and a T-shirt with a giant parrot on it, I searched my bag to see if I had any ID to prove that I really do work for *The Sunday Times* and hadn't come to mow the lawn. The brigadier was going to be snifty, I thought.

Alas, property prejudice had got the better of me. Mr Davies, or Matthew, wasn't a patrician sort at all, but an artist and stay-at-home dad with shoulder-length blond hair (think Brad Pitt circa 1992), who was even scruffier than me. How had he ended up with such a perfect Establishment house? Five bedrooms, three bathrooms, four receptions, an enormous kitchen, nearly an acre of garden, with outbuildings, and the oldest, tallest Queen Anne staircase in the county.

The family — he and his wife, Candy, have two kids — bought it eight years ago, spent three years doing it up, but have only lived in it sporadically, as her job as a swanky accountant for huge international firms has taken them to Australia and Switzerland. They now need somewhere nearer Heathrow.

It turns out the previous owner was indeed a brigadier. "But we bought it to be the perfect family home," Matthew says. The groovy young unit — with their gender-swapped roles and speakers in every room, so they can listen to Ed Sheeran — are sad to move on, especially as Matthew did much of the restoration work himself. "I wouldn't mind another project," he says, squinting sexily in the sunlight while smoking a rollie. How odd to find this lot in this stiff-upper-lipped English home. It's like arriving at Pemberley to find Russell Brand. But that's just it with houses. You never know who will open the door.

Karen Robinson is away

## ASK THE EXPERTS

### The lettings agent

My son and his wife live in a flat for which they pay rent and a recurring fee to the managing agent. Two weeks ago, during heavy rain, water started to drip through the ceiling near the central light fitting. The agent maintains that, because the leak appears to be due to a dislodged ridge tile, the landlord is under no obligation to repair. They have tried to contact the building's owner, who is in Australia, but nothing has happened. What should my son do?

PJ, by email

It seems that the freeholder of the building has been unable to make a repair that should really be carried out as a matter of urgency. It is a shame the property manager has not been more proactive. Your son's landlord has a duty to fulfil the statutory obligations placed on him in terms of repair and maintenance. Given the potential for further structural damage, a common-sense approach would be for your son's landlord to arrange the repair, then liaise with the owner of the building to seek reimbursement. There will likely be a common repair fund, and the owner may well be able to make an insurance claim if the tile has been dislodged by strong winds.

Frank Webster is a director at the Oxford branch of the lettings agency Finders Keepers; finders.co.uk

### The solicitor

I purchased a property last July, and the seller's report clearly stated that there was no Japanese knotweed. I have since noticed some in the garden — the neighbours claim the previous owner was aware of it. What can I do?

DD, by email

The principle of caveat emptor, or "buyer beware", applies to property, so you should carry out your own inspections before making a purchase. The buyer should also make all necessary inquiries of the vendor — and, if the latter answers incorrectly or untruthfully, the buyer will have a claim for misrepresentation if he relies on that information and suffers loss as a result. If the seller was aware of the knotweed and/or failed to check the position before answering the pre-contract inquiries, you would have a claim for damages. If the knotweed spreads from your property to your neighbour's, you may be held liable for damages — deal with it quickly and seek to recover costs from the seller.

Nikolas Ireland is a solicitor at Forsters LLP; forsters.co.uk

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