



Alyssa Taffet negotiated a £30-a-week discount in return for doing up the flat she rents in Hampstead

Vicki Couchman

When Kay and John Blayney started to host students in their Cambridge home two decades ago, their main motivation was the money. But the couple soon realised that the language students they hosted for Bell International College — 18-year-old Florence, from Belgium, is the latest — were bringing other assets to their household.

"They were all nice, and some were fantastic," says Kay, 46, who teaches drama at a sixth-form college in Cambridge. "People said we'd feel crowded, that it would be irritating. Far from it, and our boys [they have three, now 22, 20 and 18] have all benefited greatly."

In fact, the Blayneys' middle son, Philip, who is now studying German at the University of Sheffield, put on his college application that he was inspired as a young child to learn languages by the steady procession of foreign lodgers. "It all came from those evenings around the kitchen table with our students," Kay says. "I can say that we've gained in ways I'd never expected."

Not that the money hasn't also been useful. The couple put the rent (up to £220 a week from each student) into a "house fund". "We built the extension with it," Kay says. "Some spend it on holidays; we spend it on the home. In the current economic climate, it's a great way to bring in a bit extra, and suddenly lots of people seem to be asking us what it's like."

The days are long gone when having a lodger was seen as a sign of hardship — akin to taking in washing, perhaps. More and more people are turning that empty spare room into cash. And it's not just a matter of the £4,250 a year you can earn quite legitimately, without having to pay tax, thanks to the government's Rent-a-Room scheme. Some homeowners, such as the Blayneys, appreciate the other benefits — let's call them tenants' extras — that come from opening up your home to strangers.

Jonathan Moore, director of the flat-share agency Easyroommate, says it's increasingly common for landlords to look for tenants and lodgers who

Tenants' extra

Taking in lodgers has lost its stigma among the middle classes, but they're more than just a cash cow: now homeowners are tapping their skills, too. **Oliver Bennett** meets the renters who pay their way in kind

can chip in with chores such as gardening, cleaning, decorating, or even tutoring the family's children, usually in return for a discount on the rent.

"At present, the flat-sharing market is incredibly competitive for tenants," Moore says. "In London alone, eight renters are advertising for every room on offer. The market is in landlords' favour,

Make it work

- Under the government's Rent-a-Room scheme, up to £4,250 a year of rental income is tax-free, as long as the room is furnished
- Make the terms clear: exactly how many hours of tutoring/gardening/cleaning will your lodger do, and for what discount? And do check just how skilled they are
- With all such "goodwill agreements", put everything down in writing to avoid confusion

and they can afford to be picky about who is staying in their properties."

Teach French? Play piano? Baby-sit? Decorate? Bring it on. The idea of bartering expertise for money seems to be taking hold, meeting a contemporary spirit of skill-sharing and cost-cutting, says Simon Thompson, of the specialist letting agency Accommodation for Students (accommodationforstudents.com). "There's always been bargaining, but offering skills seems to be increasingly common. I've even heard of a situation recently where landlords are getting student tenants to make videos for them on their iPhones — for £40 a time. It's a testimonial for the property and a use of skills. After all, lots of landlords don't know how to upload to YouTube."

To some extent, he says, this is led by the landlords themselves. "They are inviting the sort of people they want in their properties, with incentives such as deals for early payment and skill-sharing."

The agency Spare Room has noticed a similar tendency, saying: "We have homeowners offering cheap rent for

lodgers willing to do baby-sitting, one homeowner offering cheap rent for a live-in carer, and one offering free rent in exchange for someone to catalogue his sheet-music collection." In the last instance, the advertisement specified that seven hours a week should be put aside for this task, which it suggested would be ideal for a music student.

It's not just lodgers who are bartering their skills for a reduction in rent. The same strategy is being pursued by tenants who rent entire flats or houses. Take Alyssa Taffet: when she was first shown a flat in leafy Hampstead, north London by Ricky Stone, director of Greene & Co estate agency, she thought it "a bit of a mess" and was not sure whether to take it. "The person before had left it in a real state," says Taffet, 41. "But I could see it was a nice place underneath it all."

The flat was also in a typical red-brick house with a garden in her favourite area, close to Hampstead Heath; and, crucially, the Australian-based landlord allowed her to keep her dog. So she asked for a discount if

she did up the flat, and the answer was a positive one.

In return for £30 knocked off the £370-a-week rent, Taffet has painted walls, laid floors and changed light fittings. "It's good for me and it's good for the flat and the landlord," she says. "Given the expense of decoration, the landlord's probably doing well from the deal, but I appreciate it, as it's to my taste."

In Oxfordshire, George and Joanne Smith, garden designers with Green Art, rent a cottage in the village of Aston Tirrold with their children, Mabel, 12, and Charlie, 9, via Finders Keepers, an Abingdon rental agency. "We moved here a couple of years ago," says Joanne, 48. "The garden was an important part of our home, and the owners — who now live in Dubai — wanted it to be kept well." As the garden was in a poor shape, it was a win-win situation: the landlord offered a £200 reduction on the rent and the Smiths got planting.

"We feel privileged," Joanne says. "They like the garden and want us to feel at home. We solve a problem for them." Thus, the Smiths have a vegetable patch, as well as chickens — which Joanne concedes is unusual in a rented house — and have created a patio that the owners actually paid for, albeit with a "mates' rates" reduction.

Few would cavil at such arrangements, but some in the industry sound a note of caution. "I would advise any landlord who reduces the rental on their property for a goodwill arrangement to agree everything in writing," says Richard Davies, head of lettings at Chesterton Humberts estate agency. "This will protect them if the 'tenant offer' is not in line with expectations."

Ah, yes. If you're planning to bring someone's skills into your home, make sure they're not from the school of Bodgit and Scarper.

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