

In at the deep end

After restoring this charming canalside house, its owner is off to brave the in-laws

BEYOND THE BROCHURE

ELEANOR MILLS



It sounds great — like winning the property lottery. A distant relative has died and left you the house, or the parents are getting too dodderly to manage their big gaff, and suggest you might take it over instead. Yet such strokes of good fortune are not always the bonanza they might seem.

Take some friends of mine. He is fortunate enough to come from a posh country family. The ancestral seat is a truly gorgeous Georgian pile, about two hours' drive, or an hour on the train, from central London. He loves it, of course — it was his childhood home. He rhapsodises about the family land, the woods he knows like the back of his hand, the way the sun slips over the hill. He would like nothing better than to raise his own family there.

For his wife, it's all a bit more complicated. She's a city girl, born and bred in the metropolis. Her friends and family are in London; and, to be honest, she's a bit allergic to the country set. Her hubby, back in those halcyon clubbing days when they first met in Ibiza, had done a good job of camouflaging his posh past. He just seemed like a normal bloke, so it was a bit of a shock to her when she first visited the "seat".

Now, though, his parents are finding the old house a bit too much to handle. They'd like to live in one wing and have my friend's family live in the rest. He's keen, and she has seriously thought about it — but the reality of being "buried", as she puts it, in the country really doesn't appeal. The result? Stalemate. In more candid moments, she admits she's terrified that if she goes rural, she'll turn into his mother — whom she loves, but doesn't want to emulate. There's also the worry that if they move, she'll be forever on his turf, unable to make the house her own or assert her own identity. She doesn't want to be subsumed any further than she already is into the bosom of his family. (They already spend many weekends and holidays there.)

I was reminded of her dilemma this week in Berkhamsted, on a visit to Lock 56, a Grade II-listed lock-keeper's cottage on the Grand Union canal. It was originally a tiny two-up, two-down dwelling on a pretty, triangular quarter-acre plot. Now, thanks to sympathetic reimagining and a modern extension — the result of a two-year battle with the planners, complicated by the property

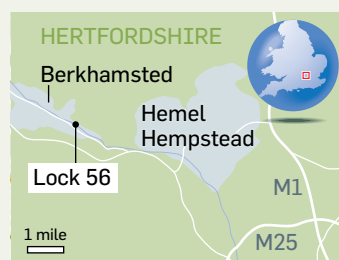


The cottage is compact, but well designed and peaceful



Lock 56, Hertfordshire, £750,000

What is it? A three-bedroom, Grade II-listed lock-keeper's cottage on the Grand Union canal
Where is it? Berkhamsted
Who is selling? Knight Frank; 01442 861610, knightfrank.co.uk



being listed partway through — it is a bijou three-bedder with a charming mixture of ancient and modern.

Its owners, Mark Hudson and his wife, Zoe, an interior designer, are moving to Little Tew, in Oxfordshire, as soon as possible with their baby, Cecily. They had intended to raise their new family (Zoe is pregnant with baby number two) in Berkhamsted, and to that end Hudson has been working on this rebuild for three years. But Zoe was recently left her granny's house — and, though he knows it's an amazing privilege, I get the impression that Hudson, who used to be a television producer, isn't too thrilled about the move.

As he shows me his newly sown lawn and tells me about the underground heat pump he has installed, I tell him about my friend. He agrees that it is an emotional minefield: he's worried about feeling like an imposter in her family house, and that other family members might not approve of the changes that they want to make. The distance is also an issue. Berkhamsted is plumb in the middle of the Hertfordshire commuter belt — leafy and quiet, with nice walks on the Chilterns, but only half an hour from Euston on the train. By contrast, Little Tew, although close to the now infamous town of Chipping Norton, is a good 90 minutes out.

I'm guessing he's also loath to leave Lock 56, which is cleverly done. Inside, it

is all painted light grey and white, with simple pale furniture, white-stained oak floors and a white carpet, which is a cunning way to make small spaces appear larger. The kitchen/diner is narrow, but long and pretty: the cream Shaker kitchen leads to a dining area with double doors to the garden. At the other end is a cosy study with a view of sky and a wood-burner. Through the modern "barn-style" glass atrium, which connects the old part to the new and houses a staircase, there's a spacious sitting room with access to the garden.

Upstairs, the old part of the house has two smallish bedrooms and a family bathroom, while across the glass landing, the extension hosts the 17ft by 11ft master suite, which has a shower room. The windows have views of the lock, longboats, ducks and the canal. It feels modern, but friendly and peaceful, though the main train line does run the other side of the water; engines rattle through with quite a roar.

It's certainly not much space for the money — even for upmarket commuter territory, with excellent schools nearby, this is overpriced. Another catch: I wouldn't live here with young children. The canal is too close and I'd be constantly worried that they'd fall in.

Hudson is undoubtedly doing the best for the future of his family. Good luck in the belly of the in-law beast.

➔ If you'd like Eleanor to cast her critical eye over a property you're selling, email btb@sunday-times.co.uk

ASK THE EXPERTS

The rural consultant

We are in the process of buying a village house, but hate the name. How easy is it to change this?

LE, by email

House names are very much a matter of personal taste — after all, not everyone wants to live at Dunroamin. The procedure for changing one is well established, if a little bureaucratic.

You will not be allowed a name that could clash with another property in the area. If you have a house number, you do not need permission to add a name, but you cannot change or delete the existing number.

To change a house name, you will need to apply to your local council, which might charge an administration fee. It will consult Royal Mail, to ensure the name will not cause confusion. After granting approval, it will provide a certificate of renaming and inform the relevant authorities.

You should tell your mortgage provider, utility companies and the emergency services about the change, and check with Royal Mail that its records have been updated — this can take 12 weeks.

➔ Philip Eddell is director of country-house consultancy at Savills; savills.com

The solicitor

I live next to a property belonging to a charity, which lets the house to holidaymakers and welcomes "well-behaved dogs". Often, they are not: I have had dog poo on my lawn, been barked at and had my cat savaged to death. The charity will not fence the property or ban dogs. Legal advice is that I should erect a fence myself, then take court action for the cost — a big financial risk, as the boundary is 200yd long. Any suggestions?

Christine Barwell, by email

There is no general duty on landowners to maintain fencing unless the deeds require them to. Study the plans in your deeds: if there is a T-mark (or an H-mark, indicating a joint obligation) on the boundary, there may be a duty to maintain it. A solicitor would need to check.

However, allowing dogs and not keeping them contained could represent a statutory nuisance. Keep a record of when dogs enter your garden, and inform the local authority. If you are worried about a particular dog, tell the police.

Of course, the simplest solution is to erect your own fence, which you may do as long as it is entirely within your own boundaries.

➔ Ed Cracknell is a solicitor at Russell-Cooke LLP; russell-cooke.co.uk

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