

In plain English

Beyond the brochure

This Wiltshire cottage is simply decorated, but it's adorable, not austere

The next person who asks me, in the name of "charidee", to sponsor a stroll in the country, a trek in exotic parts, a jolly bike ride with chums or, heaven help us, the fact that they're going to grow facial hair, will get a very dusty answer. And who'll be in the wrong? Moi, of course, because I'll be the curmudgeon who won't put my hand in my pocket after they're making all that "effort" for their chosen good cause.

Just giving? Not this time, thanks. People who really do put themselves to considerable inconvenience and discomfort to help those worse off than themselves, well, they're wholly admirable. The ones who want you to sponsor their menopausal trek up Machu Picchu ("I have to raise *whatever four-figure sum* it is to cover flights and accommodation, plus the donation to the Peruvian guinea pigs' hospice...") will be told to stay at home and give the money directly to the needy. And pay for their own adventure holiday. Using the plight of the disadvantaged as the pretext to have a bit of fun is pretty dodgy really, and not redeemed by the celebrity version, when — in the full beam of the cameras — they appear to be not having quite such a good time, ostentatiously drowning in a bog or whatever.

My musings about how best to alleviate suffering, ignorance and want in the world — a good start is to get your employer to join the scheme that allows you to have donations deducted from your salary at source — are a result of my visit to this week's house, a totally adorable cottage on the edge of Corsham, in Wiltshire. Because it got me thinking about the all-round do-gooding genius Mahatma Gandhi.

Maureen Doherty, owner of the Old Cottage, runs a boutique called "egg" in the back streets of Knightsbridge, and among her wares are items made with khadi cotton, the product of home looms originally established across India in the 1920s by Gandhi, champion of civil rights and self-determination. In a rather amusing reversal of the usual situation of British buyers paying peanuts for clothes made in questionable conditions in the subcontinent, Maureen's version is to load up her prices till they'd make an oligarch gasp — £760 for a tent dress made of what looks like sacking? Maureen seems like a nice woman, so I think we can assume that at those prices her suppliers — she also works with displaced Tibetans in Dharamsala — are getting a decent

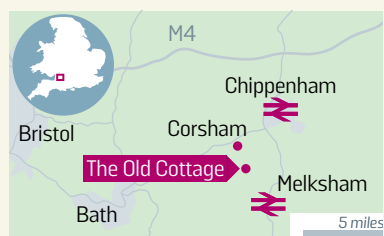


The Old Cottage has off-white walls, with pale painted furniture and a touch of faded *toile de jouy*



The Old Cottage, Corsham, Wilts £699,950

What you get Three bedrooms, 1,500 sq ft of exquisitely decorated living space, a walled garden and outbuildings
Who to call Fine & Country; 01225 320032, fineandcountry.com



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whack. And not, by the way, that anyone so vulgar as an oligarch would shop at egg. She sells "nothing with a label or that is famous. It's nothing to do with fashion, I work with makers, clothes but also potters."

In the shop and inside the golden stone walls of the Old Cottage, the watchword is "simple". Really simple, *simplissimo*, simpletastic. Not quite monastic, mind, it's comfy enough and there are nice things to look at. But I've seen pictures in one of those glossy "better homes than yours" books of how the place was done up under the previous owner, an elegant type connected to the interiors trade. It was full of highly polished antique furniture, formal pictures, lush soft furnishings and even a wall painted what I call "Belgravia yellow" (and you can have that one for free, Farrow & Ball), a rather viciously patrician shade of mustard.

So after she bought it for about £570,000 seven years ago, Maureen painted the whole place in a grey-green-tinged off-white, put in some pale painted furniture and classic gingham fabrics, with a touch of faded *toile de jouy*, and created space in which to appreciate the stone-flagged floor in the dining room, the big stone fireplaces and the characterful aged wood of the wide back door. The house already had a small, well-made kitchen and was laid out upstairs with a bedroom and bathroom on each floor, plus another bedroom you can only get to through Maureen's.

"I didn't have to do much except simplify it," she explains, and the few decorative objects attest to that. Though, as the first person to put on a show of pots by the superstar ceramicist Edmund de Waal, she wishes she had acquired more of his austere, Japanese-inspired pieces back when they cost merely hundreds of pounds.

Where she did get a bit fancy, though, was in the walled garden, where she reckons she spent £50,000 "planting, planting, planting, planting". Scrupulously trimmed trees and bushes edge the main lawn, and if you go through the gaps in the tall hedges, you find yourself in secret garden "rooms", a rectangular lily pond in one, an iron brazier in another. The good life indeed.

ASK THE EXPERTS

The loft converter

I am looking to buy a leasehold flat. I would want to add a third bedroom by extending into the loft — is this possible if I'm not the freeholder?

SM, by email

Any purchaser of a leasehold property should check the lease to see whether the roof void is part of their demised premises. In most cases, it is not included, and will need to be purchased from the freeholder. Freeholders will usually require a leaseholder to pay their legal and surveying fees, plus the value of the loft space. The price is often based on the perceived increase in the value of the lease after the conversion, so, if the work costs £45,000 and will add £100,000 to the flat's value, the freeholder could ask for the entire profit of £55,000. This is obviously subject to negotiation, but a leaseholder does not have any power to force the sale of the loft.

■ James Gold is a chartered building consultant and director of Landmark Lofts; landmark-lofts.com

The solicitor

My neighbour was granted consent to construct an extension 8in from the boundary. He has applied to change it from brick to concrete render. He withdrew from reaching an agreement on access to my land, and has said he will continue with the build, using the Access to Neighbouring Land Act to render the wall at a later date. Could he be granted access?

TC, by email

The Access to Neighbouring Land Act 1992 gives courts in England and Wales power to order access to a neighbour's land to carry out works to the applicant's own land. The order will be made if the works are reasonably necessary for the preservation of the applicant's land and cannot be carried out, or would be substantially more difficult, without entry. The order will not be made if the neighbour would suffer unreasonable hardship. The Act covers repair and maintenance, but rendering might be included. If it is, you should consider whether there would be unreasonable hardship to you as a result of the access. To minimise the risk of the court ordering you to pay your neighbour's costs, ensure you have acted reasonably in your dealings with him over giving access.

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



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