

# Not ready for takeoff

A former RAF base has been turned into housing — but where's the camaraderie?

## BEYOND THE BROCHURE

KAREN ROBINSON



**T**his week finds me in philosophical mood. Rather in the manner of a TED Talk, or a similar gobblet of prepackaged public intellectualism, I feel moved to ruminate on the meaning and nature of “community in the global age”. And so would you, if you'd just been where I've been.

Bicester North station is what started it. The train from Marylebone was stuffed with Chinese and Japanese passengers — because this is the stop for the shopping mecca that is Bicester Village. There are signs on the platforms in Asian scripts, presumably telling them this is where they have to get off. BV, as you probably know, is not a real village, but a giant shopping centre, built in the architectural vernacular of New England (no idea why), where you can buy discounted designer gear. Some of the swankier stores have bouncers, velvet ropes, the lot. Sounds terrible.

Yet label-crazy Asian customers can't get enough, apparently, and the controller in the taxi office at the station told me that Middle Eastern visitors are also big fans. It has put little Bicester, 16 miles from Oxford, on the global map.

So the taxi drivers on the cab rank outside the station all know where it is, and can whizz you there in a heartbeat if you can't bear to wait for the next shuttle bus, but they didn't have a clue about my destination. Which I found a bit disconcerting — I mean, BV is all very well, and probably contributes a lot to the local economy, but the Garden Quarter is where actual people actually live. And where the developer behind it, City & Country, boasts that it is “creating a sense of community”.

I reckon there's probably more fellow feeling among what we might call the “designer discount shopping community” on the shuttle bus, bonding over their excited anticipation of cut-price Louboutins and Barbours to come, than there is in the manicured emptiness of the Garden Quarter, a “semi-rural retreat” on the edge of Bicester.

It's not a “gated community”. No, that's frowned on. In fact, City & Country wanted this former RAF base to feel part of the local area and took down the perimeter fences and gates. Anyone can go in, any time, if they want to — but why would they? There's no shop, no pub, just a collection of smallish homes in some tidy landscaping.

OK, I have to concede that it is, in theory, a good idea — take an abandoned



The development has handsome military buildings, but feels empty



**Bicester, Oxfordshire, from £179,500**

**What you get** A one-, two- or three-bedroom flat or house in the Garden Quarter, a new development converting the buildings of an old RAF base  
**Who to call** 01869 253999, cityandcountry.co.uk



military site and turn the buildings into housing stock — but it feels so empty and soulless. The houses are on parade and standing to attention, but it is a rather dull uniform.

This is one of Sir Hugh Trenchard's bomber bases, developed in the 1920s and 1930s to beef up our air power, and the one- and two-storey buildings are handsome, sturdy, military-issue brick neo-Georgian. (That's phase one; phase two has later examples of air-force institutional building styles.) But the expanses of parade ground (now lawn) and the landscaped bits between them seem to preclude the neighbourly chumminess of a traditional urban street layout.

If, like some of the residents, you are from the Bicester area, you probably have your own personal networks or “community”. But moving in from somewhere else? Well, you'd most likely be taking advantage of the commuter links — 20 minutes' drive to Oxford, 50 minutes on the train to London — so you'd be out at work, commuting or sleeping, with little time to try to get involved in your surroundings. Isn't that the alienation we're all in danger of succumbing to in our rootless world? I guess it's no different to how new developments on the edge of towns have always felt — boring dormitories, with a distinct sense of real life going on somewhere else.

Paradoxically, it's one of the Garden Quarter's most attractive features — on

paper — that makes it seem so lifeless. The 212 homes (82 completed in phase one, the rest to come in phase two) follow the layout of the military base, with only 33 brand-new properties built as infill, so the density of the 23-acre development is noticeably lower than would have been allowed on a site without its historic connections.

The one-, two- and three-bedroom houses, flats and “cottages” (units in the single-storey buildings or semi-detached bungalows) are a bit small, but nice enough: they're fitted out to a good standard, with wooden floors and luxurious-looking bathrooms, though deploying the usual cunning omission of any wardrobes or chests of drawers in most of the show-home bedrooms. They also generally combine the kitchen, living room and dining table in one space, in the modern manner.

So, as far as I'm concerned, lots not to like. But what do I know? They're selling faster than half-price designer treggings in that place down the road. Only 13 properties remain for sale in phase one; a two-bedroom cottage, priced at £210,000 for the June 2012 launch, will now set you back at least £265,000. Rental yields are a comfortable 5%.

However, it probably needs the bonding experience of being in a wartime bomber squadron to whip up a real sense of shared lives.

✦ If you would like Karen to cast her critical eye over a property you are selling, email [btb@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:btb@sunday-times.co.uk)

## ASK THE EXPERTS

### The solicitor

Recently, 28 solar panels were put on the roof opposite my house. The roof was raised for an extension, so it is higher than normal. I consider so many panels excessive, especially when they are 30yd from my bedroom window. The owner of the property says that the council gave him permission, and that, under permitted development, he did not need to seek approval from neighbours. Is this right?

Sadie Tearle, Lewes

Permitted development rights for solar panels are given in Class A Part 40 Schedule 2 of the Town and Country (General Permitted Development) Order 1995. Crucially, the rights are fettered — the panels must be sited to minimise their effect on the look of the building and the “amenity” (appearance) of the area. In addition, they do not apply to listed buildings or conservation areas. Ask your local planning authority to take action if you believe the panels fall foul of these limitations. In a recent case, a council served an enforcement notice for removal of some panels, upheld on appeal. The inspector found that a balance must be struck between the appearance of the area and building, and the financial viability of solar panels. When the balance tips too far towards the latter, it will be outside the scope of permitted development.

✦ Alex Ground is a solicitor at Russell-Cooke LLP; [russell-cooke.co.uk](http://russell-cooke.co.uk)

### The plumber

I keep getting an overheat error on my new boiler. The engineer says that air must be getting in, and that the only way to correct it is to change to a sealed system. Is this true?

Blaine Tookey, by email

Any restriction that prevents water from cooling quickly can result in “boiler overheat”. The most common causes are air in the system, a blockage or a defective heating pump. Under most circumstances, I would advise venting air from the radiators, checking for obvious blockages such as closed valves, and feeling or listening to the pump to ensure it is spinning. In your case, it's likely that the flow temperature thermistor in the boiler is reacting at cooler temperatures than it should. A new one will cost no more than £20, and can be fitted by an engineer on the Gas Safe Register. There is no need to convert your system to a “sealed” one.

✦ Grahame Crew is general manager at WPJ Heating; [wpjheating.co.uk](http://wpjheating.co.uk)

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