

Near and yet so far

This Surrey cottage has a remote and wild setting, but you can still nip out and buy milk

BEYOND THE BROCHURE

KAREN ROBINSON



On holiday in France this summer, my fellow guests and I congratulated our hostess on a daily basis (and by extension ourselves, for being her friends) on her clever choice of Provençal holiday home. For, while it was large and welcoming, with room for a guest house and a large courtyard containing a swimming pool, it was also right in the middle of a historic and picturesque small town.

How brilliant of her not to have bought an inconvenient gîte miles up a track in the middle of nowhere, we'd say to each other as we staggered back from one of several daily excursions to "buy cheese" on the cafe-lined medieval streets.

Yet estate agents shake their heads sadly at the steady procession through their offices of people demanding extreme isolation, so fervent is their desire to banish any reminder that they share the planet with other people. "Be careful what you wish for" is a handy mantra to live by, especially if you haven't exactly thought through the consequences of your wish. Because what you could end up with is a school run of epic proportions down unmade farm tracks (and nobody to share them with), a cupboard full of UHT milk, which you come to prefer to the eight-mile round trip to the garage to get fresh, and a dwindling social life, as it turns out isolated houses never show up where they're meant to on satnav searches.

Yet we don't all see the downside. When Max and Shannan Collins went looking for a country bolt hole 23 years ago, the "i" word was at the top of their list. But they added a challenging extra condition: it had to be within an hour's drive of their home and businesses in central London. That's 50 miles, tops. Scotland, Devon, Wales, Cumbria... there are plenty of places where you can be well and truly isolated — but the home counties? Were they joking? Apparently not.

It took two years of being sent on pointless missions to view properties that you could call "isolated" only if you discounted the motorway that roared by the end of the garden, but finally they found Keeper's Cottage, several miles down an undulating track from the main road. It looked then, I imagine, much as it does now: a fairy-tale cottage, with jaunty window boxes and a chimney at each end, nestled in a bosky dell. It has just under half an acre of garden, but this

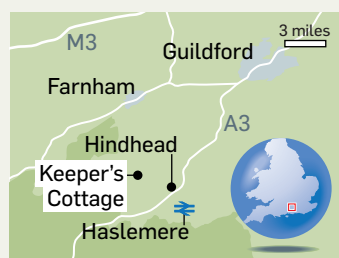


In a bosky dell, the cottage is fairy-tale pretty, yet close to London



Keeper's Cottage, Hindhead, Surrey, £895,000

What you get A three-bedroom cottage with an inglenook and a woodburner. It's near Hindhead, two miles from Haslemere, from where it's 50 minutes by train to London
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is surrounded by more than 1,000 acres of Hindhead Common and the Devil's Punch Bowl, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty run by the National Trust.

And it's the only house there. The neighbours are some rather Scottish-looking cattle with long, spreading horns; they graze the adjoining three fields. About a mile away, through ancient oak and beech forests, there's a small youth hostel, but basically, apart from walkers and riders, the Collinses are on their own. With the deer, foxes, badgers, owls, kites and herons — and the pipistrelle bats that live in special boxes under the eaves.

Heaven — or hell? For the 23 years since they paid £165,000 for a lease (recently extended to 118 years) on the compact little cottage — "We said yes, we want it, we don't care how much, we'll pay whatever you want" — they have revelled in the tranquillity, the changing seasons in the forest and the clear night skies, blissfully insulated from the commuter towns, upmarket car dealerships and golf clubs of the "real" Surrey that surrounds them.

It was initially a weekend refuge they craved from an entrepreneurial life in London that encompassed sandwich bars, gyms and property development, but recently business has wound down enough for them to use it as their main home before they relocate to Australia.

They didn't make many changes to the three-bedroom, 1,500 sq ft cottage, built from local river stone in a sturdy oak frame. It dates back to 1540, with a small extension from the 17th century. They sandblasted the tar off the beams and sealed them with wax, put a woodburner in the inglenook, made some cupboards out of reclaimed wood and installed electric heating under the red-brown clay roof tiles that Max laid on the ground floor. It's compact, cosy and uncluttered — and the Sky dish is tucked out of the way on the shed wall.

It's about 10 minutes' drive to the garage in Hindhead for milk and papers, and 20 minutes to the train to London from Haslemere. Sky and broadband notwithstanding, it's a location that takes you back in time and space. It must have been strange for Max when he turned up for the initial viewing all those years ago — for he had always remembered being brought on a "trip for poor kids" from his southeast London home to stay on nearby Beacon Hill.

"It was the best holiday I ever had. I always talked about it and, though I couldn't actually remember where it was, I did remember walking past a cottage and talking to an old guy. That was Bert Watkins, the last of the keepers for the National Trust — and it was this cottage."

➤ If you would like Karen to cast her critical eye over a property you are selling, email btb@sunday-times.co.uk

ASK THE EXPERTS

The solicitor

We live in a terraced house in east London. Last summer the new owners of the property behind ours built a 7ft-high shed with a chimney in their back garden. The smoke stops us from hanging washing on the line, and we don't want to spend time in the garden — or even open our windows. Is there anything we can do?

Shelagh and Patrick Long, by email

Assuming the property is within a smoke-control area, which most London homes are, under the Clean Air Act 1993 it is a criminal offence to allow smoke to be emitted from the chimney of a building unless an "authorised" (ie, smokeless) fuel is used. If you report your neighbours to the council, they can be prosecuted and fined. The council can also serve an abatement notice if the smoke is prejudicial to health or a statutory nuisance, but only if the shed is not considered to be a "private dwelling". If council action does not resolve the problem, try talking to your neighbours before seeking advice from a solicitor about making a civil claim. If you need to do the latter, it is worth saving evidence to support any claim, such as photographs and a detailed record of the nuisance.

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

The DIY expert

We have a couple of decked areas in our garden, one of which is over a large natural pond. Every time the decking gets damp, it becomes very slippery. How can I make the surface safer?

Ann Nevinson, by email

The best thing is to use an antislip deck coating such as the one produced by Blackfriar (blackfriar.co.uk; £23.95 for 2.5 litres). It contains microaggregates — sand, essentially — that stick down when you paint it on, leaving an abrasive nonslip surface. The decking needs to be spotlessly clean before you apply the coating — ideally, you should use a power washer and a stiff broom — and then you need to wait until it is properly dry. Follow the manufacturer's instructions to paint it on: Blackfriar says the coating will be touch-dry in about four hours and can be overpainted after 16. You will need a second coat. Coverage is usually 12-14 square metres per litre.

➤ Mike Edwards is the owner of diydoctor.org.uk

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