

# Anything for a quiet life

Moving to the country doesn't guarantee silence, but this Kentish idyll comes close

## BEYOND THE BROCHURE

ELEANOR MILLS



It's a popular belief that moving to the country means rural bliss and tranquillity. The reality, however, is often rather noisier — and not just because of tractors, mowers, barking dogs and dawn-busting cockerels. I've noticed that many of the country houses I see suffer from traffic blight.

It takes careful looking to find a spot far enough from a main road to erase all engine-revving pollution. That's particularly true in villages, many of which were constructed along thoroughfares — an otherwise gorgeous period cottage can be rendered deeply unlovely by juggernauts thundering past, inches from the windows. To walk anywhere in such settlements can be life-threatening. It's certainly not the child-friendly bucolic idyll that attracts many to the rural lifestyle.

In the crowded southeast, houses that on paper look peaceful all too often aren't. What on earth is the point of moving to the sticks if the tweeting of birds and the snapping of twigs are constantly interrupted by the roar of passing motors?

It is a paradox of modern living that we want good transport connections and the ability to whizz about, yet don't want to hear any evidence of all that travel. The country ideal is well-connected silence. It's not easy to find.

One place that does provide that elusive combination, however, is the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), between Ashford (37 minutes from London on the Javelin train) and Canterbury (one of our loveliest regional cities, with stupendous schools and a jaw-dropping cathedral).

Much of Kent is pretty flat, but this part has not only the gorgeous chalk escarpment of the Downs, but folding hills, woodland, pretty views and little development. Its unspoilt villages include Waltham, Hastingleigh, Wye, Stowting and Chilham.

While prices in some parts of the county have been falling — particularly between Canterbury and the coast, because of the closure of the Pfizer factory at Sandwich — this golden area has been holding up nicely. Local agents tell me that, in 2011, they sold no houses priced at about £1m, but this year the strength of the market in the capital has meant a mini boom of London-leavers buying family houses with land within

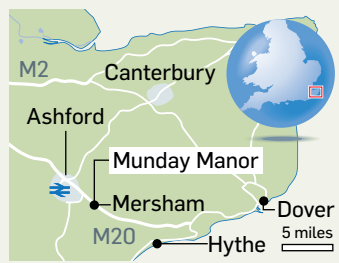


The 16th-century mini manor has beams and wonky floors, with a modern kitchen in an annexe



## Munday Manor, Ashford, Kent, £895,000

**What is it?** A four-bedroom 16th-century house in three acres, with a separate one-bed cottage, 10 minutes' drive from Ashford  
**Who is selling?** Strutt & Parker; 01227 451123, struttandparker.co.uk



15 minutes' drive of Ashford. One in Great Chart, with 11 acres, has just sold for £800,000.

It is easy to see the appeal. I went to see Munday Manor, less than 10 minutes' drive from Ashford station, which looks towards the Downs (it is just outside the AONB). Built in the 16th century, this mini manor is all beams and wonky floors, huge inglenook fireplaces and ancient glass. The roof descends almost to the ground. There are four bedrooms in the main house and a new annexe with a modern kitchen. The drawing room is magnificent — you could live in the mighty fireplace. Next door is a panelled dining room.

Its owner, John Raisbeck, is a former CEO of a mining company. A rugged chap, he has lived everywhere from Zambia to Indonesia, via South America, but has been here for 30 years. His wife died four years ago. "To start the next act in my life, I need to move," he says. "This place holds too many memories."

I begin to get his drift — because, at that very moment, a red-lipsticked *femme fatale* emerges from the bedroom. "This is my, er, friend, er, Joan," he says, adding, with a leer: "I'm *soixante-neuf* next birthday." He's planning to head to Hythe: "I've got my eye on a house that backs onto the golf course, with views of the Channel."

Like its owner, Munday Manor is old and characterful. It could also be a nice little earner: a cottage converted from

an ancient barn is rented out as a holiday let and could bring in about £15,000 a year. There's also a double garage with a separate studio flat — again lettable, at £8,000 a year. Those extra billets make this house a good bet for someone who needs an income or who wants to provide accommodation for teens, a dependent granny or an au pair. The three-acre garden is also attractive, with an orchard (which could be fenced in if a pony paddock were required), lawns, a moated "island", a summerhouse and a dozen or so 500-year-old oak trees.

What about the all-important noise factor? Well, I'm sorry to say there is a bit of traffic noise from the Ashford bypass, though John says it's three miles away and you usually can't hear it. The house is also near the M20, though not within earshot. More worrying, for me, is the gradual creep of Ashford's commuter suburbs — a Poundbury-style settlement is only about a mile away. I reckon it's worth looking closely at what else has got planning permission. It's a lovely spot, though, and the local village, Mersham, has a community-owned pub. (John is down there most days, and would probably sell on his share.) If you're looking for space and character within commuting distance of London — and a good deal for your money — this could be a winner. Shame it fails the silence test.

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

## ASK THE EXPERTS

### The solicitor

**My father-in-law is terminally ill and is trying to get his affairs in order. His mortgage is paid off, but when he phoned his solicitor to get the deeds to his house, he found that the firm had closed. It had not informed him or left any forwarding details. What can we do to track down the lost property deeds?**

Gabrielle Amante, by email

You should contact the Law Society, which may have details of where the firm's deeds were placed when it closed; it may even have appointed one of its agents to collect such papers when it became aware of the closure. The society should also be able to tell you whether the company has been taken over by another firm, which would now hold the deeds.

If the property is registered at the Land Registry (as most properties in England and Wales are), you can obtain copies of the title and any other relevant documentation (for example, the lease, if the property is leasehold). Your father-in-law should instruct a solicitor to obtain these. If the deeds also held copies of planning permission or building regulations consent, then duplicates can be obtained from the local authority. If the property is to be sold, copies from the Land Registry and the local authority should satisfy a buyer's solicitor.

✦ Donall Murphy is a partner at Russell-Cooke LLP; [russell-cooke.co.uk](http://russell-cooke.co.uk)

### The builder

**I live in a small terraced house and am thinking about converting a space on the landing to create a wet room. I spoke to a builder who said that, once the walls are in, the space would be small, and that tiling could be a problem. How can I overcome this, and are there any alternatives to tiles?**

ID, by email

A number of companies produce waterproof panels that can be fitted as an alternative to tiles; see [showerwall.co.uk](http://showerwall.co.uk) and [wetwall.com](http://wetwall.com). These panels are generally constructed from a moisture-resistant MDF core, with a smooth, watertight laminated finish that is hard-wearing and stain-resistant. They are quicker to install than tiles and no grouting is required. The panels can also be fitted directly to your partition wall joists, saving valuable centimetres.

✦ Hugh Best-Shaw is director of DCM Residential; [dcmresidential.co.uk](http://dcmresidential.co.uk)

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