

# Whiter than white

A flat in this former abbey is dazzlingly bright, but it feels more like a hotel than a home

## BEYOND THE BROCHURE

ELEANOR MILLS



Like many of my generation, I was a bit of a late convert to marriage. Most of us hooked up, lived together, had the sprogs, then just about got round to tying the knot (often rather lavishly, despite the horse having well and truly bolted). Having attended both of my parents' second weddings by the time I was six, I never really got the bridezilla gene.

Then I got pregnant with my first child, and everything changed. At that point, I'd been with my now husband for five years, we had a substantial shared mortgage and were going halves on a baby. Suddenly, I didn't see what I was trying to prove by not being married. For starters, he wouldn't have had many rights over the kid if we weren't; and, rather to my surprise, I found it was important to me that we all shared the same name. So, at the 11th hour — with a big bump, minimal fuss and only two witnesses — we got married.

I suppose, in terms of wedding provision, my dad got off lightly. To his eternal credit, he proposed that, as we were headed for Oxford register office, we should stay the night before — at his expense — at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, Raymond Blanc's heavenly hotel and Michelin-starred restaurant in nearby Great Milton.

Back then, Raymond was not the national telly treasure he is today, but his food was already world-class. I remember a sublime small glass of "essence of tomato" from my pre-wedding supper and a honeymoon suite with a telly that rose up and out of a Louis XV cupboard.

My husband and I — doesn't that sound queenly? — decided that, as we've now managed a decade of marriage together, we should celebrate by going back to the Manoir for dinner and the night (*sans enfants*).

It could not have been more perfect. The sun shone (truly a miracle this summer) as we strolled through the extensive kitchen garden, discussing which veg we fancied for supper. At dinner time, we devoured canapés and chomped our way through the tasting menu, highlights of which were a beetroot terrine with horseradish sorbet (yum), duck with cherries and, for pudding, strawberries six ways (puréed, dried, fresh, ice cream, sorbet and in a coulis).

The dining room, in a conservatory overlooking the garden, is one of my favourites: so romantic as night falls,



Built for a Russian prince in 1905, Nashdom Abbey now attracts well-heeled international types



## Nashdom Abbey, Bucks, £675,000

**What is it?** A three-bedroom flat in a converted neo-Regency abbey built by Luytens  
**Where is it?** The village of Taplow, near Maidenhead  
**Who is selling?** Fine; 01753 886177, fine.co.uk



and big enough that eavesdropping on the other guests is impossible. Crucially, the service is attentive but never cloying. Breakfast — porridge, croissants, fruit salad, home-made jam — served in our room, was the biggest improvement in the past 10 years. A feast.

As ever, duty calls and all good things come to an end, so I crunched up the Manoir's exquisite drive, then took the M40 to Taplow, in Buckinghamshire. This short zoom over the Chilterns brought me to a spacious split-level flat in Nashdom Abbey, a white neo-Regency palace built for a Russian prince by Edwin Luytens in 1905. It was turned into a Benedictine monastery in 1929 — the monks come back at Christmas to sing — but since 1997 its calling has been to provide luxury flats for well-heeled international types who want a lock-up-and-leave, hotel-style bolt hole only 20 minutes' drive from Heathrow.

The logistics are great: 10 minutes' north to the M40, about the same south to the M4. Roisin Cassidy, the flat's striking Irish blonde owner, often gets a taxi home after a night out in Chelsea

(£50 with her local minicab firm). Yet, despite the odd plane overhead, the location is rural and tranquil; the abbey sits in 17 acres, with woods, lawns, rose gardens, tennis courts, a gym and a handsome swimming pool with a barbecue area (all kept in immaculate condition by the caretaker).

Roisin is moving (reluctantly) to be able to walk to her daughter's school in Beaconsfield. Her flat is white and bright — it was once the orangery — and has a 30ft high sitting room with a mezzanine dining room, flooded with light from huge sash windows.

The rest is a bit of a warren, and the rooms are not enormous, but white walls and carpets make the best of the dark corridors. The decor is a little tired, and the kitchen and bathroom have seen better days, but the master bedroom is wonderfully bright and has a terrace.

It's all perfectly pleasant, but a little bit soulless, like a stage set or a smart airport hotel. The day I visited, it was almost spookily quiet. We didn't see anyone else on our ramble round the grounds. Roisin says many of the neighbours are well-heeled oldies who live abroad, or parents with children at Eton who come only in the holidays.

To me, it feels antiseptic, and I'd be wary of the £5,000-a-year service charge. Personally, I'd opt for the odd stay at the Manoir and living somewhere less gated and more real. If, however, you fancy hotel facilities 365 days a year, this well-connected abbey could be for you. I'll pass — but here's to my silver wedding chez Raymond. I can't wait.

✦ If you'd 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

I live in a building consisting of two flats, and we've been charged more than £60 for replacing two light bulbs in the hallway. Do we have the right to prevent this happening again?  
*Sara Evans, by email*

One would hope that routine maintenance of this sort would be absorbed into the overall management contract and not attract a one-off charge. A solicitor would need to check your lease to assess whether the landlord can make these charges, but all residential leaseholders have the right to challenge service charges if they are unreasonable. To do this, you would need to apply to the Leasehold Valuation Tribunal (the LVT). That said, the amount in question here probably doesn't justify the hassle. To avoid this happening again, speak to the landlord and manager about how such matters can be better handled in future.

If all else fails, leaseholders have rights to change or take over the management of their building. The Leasehold Advisory Service ([lease-advice.org](http://lease-advice.org)) can provide advice about the options.

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

### The gas engineer

We have a large sitting room with solid floors, gas central heating, double glazing, wall and loft insulation — but it has just one radiator, which, at 5ft, is less than half the width of the wall. It is also under a window. We are both 79, and are finding it insufficient in winter, when it is always cold at floor level. What is the best way to solve this problem, and how do we find someone to help us?  
*M Marsh, by email*

The best solution would be to install a larger radiator. Without knowing the height of the room or the exact insulation, it is difficult to be precise, but you need about 14,000 British thermal units, which equates to 4.5kW of heat. An 8ft by 1ft 4in double convactor radiator should do the trick (from about £215 at [discountedheating.co.uk](http://discountedheating.co.uk)), but you can reduce the length and increase the height — use a website such as [radiatorsizingcalculator.co.uk](http://radiatorsizingcalculator.co.uk) to work this out. Alternatively, you could install underfloor heating or an air-to-air heat pump. To find a competent gas fitter in your area, go to [gassaferegister.co.uk](http://gassaferegister.co.uk).

✦ Will Hawksley is codirector of WPJ Heating; [wpjheating.co.uk](http://wpjheating.co.uk)

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