

Abnormal for Norfolk

This chichi holiday home, dog bath and all, suits 'Chelsea-on-Sea' to a tee

BEYOND THE BROCHURE

KAREN ROBINSON



And so to Burnham Market, and this week's burning question. How did this village, a couple of miles from the beaches and creeks of north Norfolk, become the county's most expensive and fashionable enclave? Prices so far outstrip the area's average that local buyers account for only 10% of property purchases, and it is now known far and wide as "Burnham Mark-up".

I ask Ben Marchbank, from the local estate agent Bedfords, if he knows why he's getting prices of £1m and more. He ventures an explanation: "People came to this area for beach holidays as a child, so I suppose it resonates with their childhood memories." Maybe so, but for an area that, while undeniably gorgeous in good weather, is suicidally bleak when it turns cold and wet, and is a good 90 minutes from the point where travellers from London run out of motorway, that's not entirely a clincher.

The unspoilt nature of the area, he goes on, must appeal to the affluent middle classes, and it can be an easier coast to reach than the southwest. "And that demographic," he adds, "have become increasingly affluent. But I don't understand the whole Jack Wills phenomenon."

The existence of a branch of the preppy teen outfitter on the green at Burnham Market is a handy shorthand for the town's wholesale conversion into an upper-middle-class holiday haven. It is just one of a slew of shops that have transformed the retail environment from one selling things you need, to one hawking stuff you really want — including a boutique that sells Ralph Lauren, another that carries a staggering range of mother-of-the-bride hats, with a well-stocked panama department for the chaps, and an interiors emporium stuffed with Emma Bridgewater china and cashmere throws. One regular visitor to Burnham Market reckons it's the pub that has brought the big money in. The Hoste Arms was transformed by the late Paul Whittome, but actually — *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* notwithstanding — it's a garish exercise in 1980s-camp-meets-country-house. The food is pleasing to metropolitan tastes, however, and Whittome was friends with Amanda Holden.

Which is not to say that Burnham is in any way celebrity — though Johnny Depp did once have a cuppa at Tilly's tea room — it's more about quiet, middle-class professional cash.



The architect-designed house has marble tiles, a hand-built kitchen and low-maintenance gardens



Willow Tree House, Norfolk, £1.2m

What is it? A five-bed, three-bath detached house, built in 2005
Where is it? Burnham Market, 21 miles from King's Lynn
Who is selling? Bedfords; 01328 730500, bedfords.co.uk



So where are the well-off buyers coming from? Marchbank can't pinpoint any specific postcodes flocking to what the locals also call Chelsea-on-Sea, "though there's often a clique: certain law firms where several partners have bought. And last year I sold houses to two City people from the same street in Islington".

The London-based owners of Willow Tree House, he tells me, run their own business. In 2005 they knocked down the existing 1950s house in Herring's Lane, a leafy road that leads from the green to open countryside with views to the sea — and built their seaside bolt hole, which they never rented out, though it would easily fetch "a couple of grand a week".

It is, quite simply, immaculate, inside and out, with an overall colour palette of bleached-seashell white, driftwood browns, sea blue and pale sand — the "coastal modern" that connoisseurs of the upscale British seaside holiday home will recognise, right down to the telescope at an upstairs window. A snoop through the windows of the flint and red-brick holiday cottages in the village (two-bedders go for £350,000-£400,000) reveals many variations on the same concept, sometimes with one of those models of a sea bird standing on one leg to reinforce the theme.

However, Willow Tree House is rather more expensively kitted out than the average buy-to-let, with palest grey,

artistically asymmetrical marble tiling throughout the ground floor, and a raised stainless-steel dog bath with shower mixer taps in the utility room — nothing so primitive as a post-beach blast with the garden hose for the pampered pooch here.

The hand-built kitchen has a range and an island topped with black marble, and the space flows through from the dining area past the grand piano to the living space. There's a downstairs bedroom, three upstairs (though one, for a house designed from scratch by a local architect, has ended up with a puzzlingly tiny window) and more sleeping space under the roof. There's a big wooden balcony off the master suite, and the three spacious bathrooms have expensively monochrome decor and fittings.

The outside space is low-maintenance — a flagged terrace, some box hedges, a couple of borders and quite a lot of gravel — ideal for a weekend retreat. So will Marchbank get the £1.2m asking price? He's quite confident, Herring's Lane being practically the Hamptons of north Norfolk. There are several ambitious projects on the go in the area, keeping the local builders busy — will they remember, when they present their bills, that they're in Burnham Mark-up?

✦ Eleanor Mills is away. If you'd like her to cast her critical eye over a property you're selling when she returns, email btb@sunday-times.co.uk

ASK THE EXPERTS

The solicitor

I have owned two timeshare weeks in Florida for 15 years. I no longer need them, but am having real trouble disposing of them. The resort is only interested in selling recently built property, which, because of the current economic situation, is proving challenging. They attempt to solve the resulting cash-flow problem by significantly increasing the annual maintenance charges, which makes purchasing a timeshare increasingly unattractive. On top of being saddled with annual maintenance charges of more than £1,000, my timeshares are considered part of my estate, so the maintenance charges will become the responsibility of my children on my death. Is there any safe way of disposing of timeshares?

RD, by email

Timeshare properties are notorious for the problems encountered when trying to sell them. You should contact the resort and ask if they want to "buy back" the timeshare, as some contracts contain the resort's right of first refusal. If you try to sell to someone else, then extreme caution is needed: there are many scams involving paying fees in advance to dubious agents who then disappear leaving you out of pocket and still saddled with the timeshare property. You should research a reputable company who can handle the sale on your behalf without advance payments. Unfortunately, it is common for timeshares to be sold for a fraction of the amount initially paid.

✦ Donall Murphy is a partner at Russell-Cooke LLP; russell-cooke.co.uk

The exterminator

We have mice in our house; what is the kindest way to be rid of them?

AN, by email

Live-capture mousetraps are available as an alternative to "snap-traps". These can be very effective and have the added advantage of allowing you to catch more than one mouse at a time. However, unless you check them regularly (at least once a day), they are anything but humane. Also, make sure there is food in the trap: try chocolate or unsalted nuts. There is also the problem of where to release the mice. Let them go in the garden and they will probably be back indoors before you are. Many animals prey on mice, so make sure you release yours in a place with plenty of cover.

✦ Richard Strand is a pest information consultant; pestfreehome.co.uk

Do you need help from one of our experts? Email your questions to propertyexperts@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice is given without responsibility