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Tales of the Country

Brian Viner

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Leaving the Toilet Handle Behind

Leominster, pronounced Lemster, isn't the town it was. It is said to have peaked in 1380. Still, apart from the occasional outbreak of cholera, a steep economic decline in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and its modern status as the venue for the annual congress of the Test Card Circle, a group of people who gather to celebrate great television test card transmissions of our time, the subsequent 625 or so years have not treated it too badly.

And let me right away take back that slur on the Test Card Circle. The 2003 highlights – I quote from the official programme – included sessions called 'Saturday Night Almost Live, featuring something for everyone, with BBC and ITA music from the days of Test Card C right through to the Ceefax era' and 'Back To School – relive your childhood with those ITV Schools Intervals'. There was also a spontaneous debate about the celebrated incident, on Sunday, 9 October 1969, when the BBC2 tape was accidentally played on BBC1. The stalwarts of the Test Card Circle are the kind of people who make Britain such a wonderful country. I mean that sincerely.

But it's not just people who make Britain a wonderful place to live; it's places too. Places like Leominster. It is an unremarkable little town in many ways, yet it has some timbered buildings dating from 1450, which were shops then and are shops now. We Brits go on holiday to places like Greece and Turkey and ooh and aah when we hear that a building has been in continuous use as a retail outlet for over 500 years, yet here they are in north Herefordshire, containing skeletons of women who were forced to wait a bit too long while the original shopkeeper carried on a cheerful conversation with the person he was serving. Leominster's still like that.

It is also the town closest to where I live. Our house is in Docklow, about five miles east of Leominster, just off the Bromyard road. It is surrounded by open farmland, and we enjoy a marvellous view, on a clear day, of Lord Hereford's Knob.

To learn more about Lord Hereford's Knob, plough on. This book is the story of how a family – my family – adapted to living in the heart of the English countryside after moving from Crouch End, a fashionable area of north London. There are no funny

Frenchmen or stubborn Spaniards in this story, but we still had a different culture to grapple with and a new language to learn. In Herefordshire, if you tell someone something that they find surprising, they might very well tell you to 'get up the brook, Leonard'. It means 'get away' or 'you don't say', but it seems to me a far more interesting exclamation. Which brook, and who Leonard is or was, nobody seems to know.

I was forty when, to the surprise of our friends in London, we moved up the brook, Leonard. This was a growing phenomenon in England. Between 1981 and 2002, the rural population had grown much faster than the urban one, by around 81,000 people a year compared with roughly 48,000. By 2002, just over 14 million people, or 28.5 per cent of the population, lived in districts officially considered rural. So we weren't exactly bucking a trend. But within our own social circle we were. And within a few months of arriving in Docklow, our lives had changed comprehensively.

For example, until I was forty I had considered the chicken, if I considered it at all, a creature to be eaten, preferably with roast potatoes, carrots, peas and gravy. I did not consider it a creature to be fed, watered and housed, let alone to be addressed as 'darling'.

These thoughts meandered through my mind one morning while visiting the henhouse to check for eggs. I opened the door to the nesting box to find Ruby, one of our Buff Rock bantams, in earnest mid-lay. 'Sorry, darling,' I said instinctively, and closed the door.

It took me a moment or two to realise that I had just called a chicken 'darling', an endearment previously reserved for my wife and three children. Was this what living in the country was all about, muttering sweet nothings to poultry? And if so, was it such a bad thing?

A couple of days later I was driving along the A44 to Leominster. It was a crisp spring morning. I was feeling Mr Toadishly pleased with myself for moving out of a crowded metropolis to such a glorious part of England, and altogether bullish about life. I don't know if you can be toadish and bullish at the same time, but if it is possible anywhere, then Herefordshire's the place for it. And as I admired the pleasing silhouette of the Black Mountains, filling the horizon thirty-odd miles away across the Welsh border, I was suddenly overcome with the need to make a noise.

I inserted a CD, a Beach Boys compilation. Coincidentally, just as they, and I, started exultantly singing 'I Get Around', I spotted a hitchhiker slumped on the verge of the road, one grubby thumb unenthusiastically raised. I drew up, and turned the music off. 'I get around' was almost certainly not this guy's anthem: he looked as though he'd been there for a month.

He clambered gratefully aboard. It turned out that he was twenty-five, and decidedly down on his luck. His girlfriend had just left him and taken the car; he had no job and no prospects. But at least he wasn't on heroin, unlike 80 per cent, so he said, of

the people he'd been at school with in Leominster. 'Get up the brook, Leonard,' I said. 'You what?' he said.

His company was depressing, but enlightening. It is hardly a secret that some country folk feel resentful towards 'incomers', especially those from London, and some of that resentment has to do with the former city-dwellers' almost wilful ignorance of the grievous social and economic problems with which many parts of Britain are afflicted. I didn't want to be one of those ex-townies who feel they know the countryside once they have worked out how to make toast on an Aga. It was strongly in my interests, I thought, as I listened to his tale of woe, to understand this dimension of country life.

All his old schoolmates had £50 a week habits, minimum, he told me, and he couldn't understand where they found the money; he was struggling to find £50 a week just to pay the rent. How unutterably miserable, I thought, to find yourself envious of friends addicted to heroin. But how miserable, too, to eke out 50 quid's worth of the stuff over an entire week. I had encountered people in London with £200-a-morning hard drugs habits, minimum.

I'd never felt much sympathy for them, just as it's hard to feel for a guy who prangs his brand-new Lamborghini. But how could you not feel desperately sorry for young people in a small market town with little money and less hope, squandering what money and hope they could muster on the contents of a syringe?

Anyway, just as my hitchhiker friend was puncturing the happiness with which I had started the journey, he cheered me up no end by sniffing the air inside my Volvo and saying, 'Are you a chicken-farmer then?'

I glanced at him in astonishment. Where, I asked, had he got that idea?

'I can smell chicken feed,' he said. 'I reckon you must be a chicken-farmer.'

I thought about this for a moment. We had lived in the country for only a few months. In that time I had done a lot of walking through the fields surrounding our house, golden retriever at my heels, waxed jacket rippling in the westerly wind, but I'd been told that I still looked quite a lot like a townie, maybe because even with my wellies on I still walked around rather than through the cowpats.

But to be assured by a lad born and bred in Herefordshire that I carried the whiff of a chicken-farmer, that seemed like acceptance indeed, almost a rite of passage. Laughing loudly, in fact trying to suppress a note of hysteria, I told him that I wasn't a chicken-farmer, but that we had bought three Buff Rock bantams and a Gold Sebright, which I'd just been feeding.

'Oh,' he said gloomily. 'If you had been a chicken-farmer, I was going to ask you for some labouring work.'

I felt suddenly depressed again. This A44, I thought, it's an emotional bloody roller coaster.

Eighteen months earlier, I had never even heard of the A44, let alone roller-coasted along it. We lived in a four-bedroomed, terraced Edwardian house in Park Avenue South, Crouch End, part of the London Borough of Haringey.

Crouch End, like huge swathes of London, sprang up between about 1890 and 1910 in an entrepreneurial flurry of house-building, intended to accommodate a new bourgeoisie of white-collar workers and their families. It lies to the east of affluent Highgate and the north of shabby Finsbury Park, and contains characteristics of both. There is a note of affluence in the shabbiness of Crouch End, and shabbiness in its affluence.

We celebrated the turn of the new millennium in Crouch End and had no plans to leave. Several neighbours had become dear friends and although they, like us, came from the provinces, we all considered ourselves Crouch Enders in much the same way as regulars at the Queen Vic consider themselves East Enders. It seemed like part of our being. We had even come to terms with the indecorous name Crouch End, with its faint redolence of lavatories and bodily functions. When an American I met on holiday started giggling, on being told where in London we lived, I went on the offensive. His name was Tray, which seemed to me far more embarrassing than living somewhere called Crouch End. I spent most of that evening trying to exact revenge by getting Tray to say 'the drinks are on me'. He never did, alas.

We bought our house in Park Avenue South in 1994, mortgaging ourselves to the hilt and slightly beyond. Until 1994 we could not have come close to making the repayments, but in January that year I began a fairly well-paid new job, for the Mail on Sunday newspaper. For five years before that I had banked an ordinary local newspaperman's salary – i.e. not much – even though I worked for no ordinary local newspaper: the Hampstead & Highgate Express, universally known as the Ham & High. Universally known as such in Hampstead and Highgate, anyway, which pretty much counts as universal on those rarefied slopes of north London.

I started there as a humble news reporter and loved it. There was a daily grind but it was not the daily grind endured by reporters on other local papers, of church fetes and school hockey results. Even the mundane stories had a unique north London tang. Typical was a phone call I received in the newsroom one day from a woman with a cut-glass accent. 'I'm from PHAFF,' she snapped. 'I beg your pardon?' I said. 'PHAFF,' she repeated, irritably. 'Primrose Hill Against Flash Floods.' It is still my all-time favourite acronym, and I sometimes wonder if they couldn't have kept it even once they'd sorted out the flash flooding, by finding another object for their ire. Perhaps they could have reformed as Primrose Hill Against Fast Food, or Primrose Hill Against Frederick Forsyth.

The editor of the Ham & High was a human terrier called Gerald Isaaman, who had been editor since around the time of the early Plantagenets. He used to boast that the Ham & High was the only local paper with a foreign policy; it was certainly the only local paper with book reviews contributed by, among others, Michael Foot, Melvyn Bragg, John Le Carré, Salman Rushdie, Tariq Ali, Fay Weldon and Margaret Drabble, all of whom, like all self-respecting liberal intellectuals, lived in the H&H circulation area.

We even had a full-time art critic, an unusual woman called Linda, who used to float through the office in voluminous kaftans, and rarely spoke to anybody. Linda expressed herself mainly through her writing, which was unfortunate, as none of us could make head or tail of it. Her greatest hour came when she delivered an obituary of a local ceramicist. 'The highlight of Alison Corrigan's career,' she wrote, in a rare burst of comprehensible prose, 'was the week she displayed her jugs in St Martin-in-the-Fields.'

It was hard leaving the Ham & High, but joining a national newspaper was the fulfilment of a long-nurtured ambition, as big a career highlight for me as it had been for the late Alison Corrigan to show her doubtless impressive jugs in St Martin-in-the-Fields. I became the Mail on Sunday's television critic. My wife, Jane, whom I'd met at the Ham & High (where, as deputy news editor, she'd been my boss), was by now a producer on Radio 4's Woman's Hour. With our combined income we could just about afford to move to Crouch End, London N8.

We took with us our baby daughter, Eleanor. The following spring, in April 1995, our second child, Joseph, was born in the Whittington Hospital, Highgate.

North London seemed to us like a wonderful place to bring up children. There were playgroups and music groups and dance groups, many of them run by vegetarian women in smocks. We watched Crouch End, and neighbouring Muswell Hill, becoming more middle-class by the day.

It had not always been so. Muswell Hill was the home of Ronnie Barker's character, Norman Stanley Fletcher, in the incomparable sitcom *Porridge*. When Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais created *Porridge*, in 1973, they must have reckoned that Muswell Hill was exactly the sort of dreary, down-at-heel area of London where someone like Fletcher might have lived. They could equally have chosen Crouch End, down the hill. Yet in 1997 the television writers Maurice Gran and Laurence Marks wrote a romantic comedy called *Unfinished Business* and set it in Crouch End. It starred Henry Goodman as an architect and Harriet Walter as an optometrist, very possibly the first optometrist in the entire history of romantic comedy. I wasn't sure of their reasons for giving a fictional character a career in optics, but they were bang on the nail to recognise Crouch End as having become the sort of place where architects and optometrists fall in love.

And then have children. In a playground one afternoon, 2-year-old Joseph dithered at the top of a slide, to the increasing exasperation of the little boy behind him. I stood at the bottom, encouraging him down. 'Come on, sausage,' I called. Eventually the little boy issued a formal complaint to his father, who wore trendy blue-rimmed spectacles and looked very much like an architect, probably married to an optometrist. 'Daddy,' he shouted crossly. 'Sausage won't go down the slide!'

It never occurred to the child that Sausage might not be our son's name. Nor, probably, to his father. Ironically, the rude American Tray would have felt perfectly at home in the playgrounds of London N8 and N10, which were full of men and women calling out wacky names. The sausage mix-up was understandable, because frequently they were names of things you could eat.

'Jambalaya, it's time to go home!'

'Saffron, stop being horrid to Roquefort!'

'Chowder, darling, you'll be late for Marmalade's party!'

In August 1998 we had another son, whom we rather unimaginatively named Jacob. We would clearly have to pretend, when he reached the swings, slides and roundabouts age, that he had been named after the cream cracker.

Jacob was born at home. We already felt umbilically attached to Park Avenue South, but almost literally so when Jacob slithered to the (plastic-sheeted) floor in our ensuite bathroom. The midwife who delivered him was a huge West Indian woman of blessed temperament and fabulous fruity vowels. Her name was Margaret Hill and she was the mother of Mel, who featured in the first series of Channel 4's Big Brother and enjoyed fifteen minutes of fame as dazzling as they were fleeting. When Jane phoned Margaret to report her first contraction, it was Mel who took the call.

This was another enjoyable dimension to living in that part of north London – the casual and often improbable encounters with celebrity. To Jane it seemed perfectly normal that Mel from Big Brother's mum should be gynaecologically acquainted with her, although she did wonder, at the height of Big Brother-mania, whether she should sell her story to the Sun – 'Mel's Mum Saw My Bum'.

Meanwhile, most people we knew locally had at some point, in Marks & Spencer on Muswell Hill Broadway, reached for the same Gruyère and Parsnip Bake as Victoria Wood. Or if not Victoria Wood, Alison Steadman. But with due respect to those two admirable women, Crouch End had even hipper celebrities than Muswell Hill. The actor Neil Morrissey lived there. So did the DJ Andy Kershaw. The X-Files actress Gillian Anderson had been a schoolgirl there. It was repeatedly rumoured that Bob Dylan, of all people, had been seen house-hunting in N8.

Now, it is obligatory for anyone with a journalistic training to follow all references to Bob Dylan with the observation that the times they are a-changin'. It is something they teach you in media studies. But a-changin' the times they certainly were. As Crouch End became trendier, property values soared. And, despite our growing affection for the area, we found ourselves entering a phase of mild emotional instability, dubbed, by some Wildean wit or other, the 'metropause'. The metropause can apparently be defined as the midlife urge to leave the city, to swap a tiny garden for several acres, to exchange the sound of hooting traffic for that of hooting owls. Moreover, as I was increasingly working from home and Jane had quit the BBC, a move out of London seemed timely.

It was a weekend in Bath that turned us metropausal. I bet lots of people from London experience the onset of the metropause during weekends in Bath. We spent twenty-four hours with our noses flattened against estate agents' windows, detaching ourselves occasionally to eat, sleep and look after the children. But to our rather patronising surprise, houses in Bath, even the less Jane Austen parts, were no cheaper than in Crouch End.

So our interest started radiating outwards from Bath, and we were particularly enticed by details of a late Georgian house in Frome, Somerset. We made an appointment to see it, and liked what we saw. In stark contrast with our fifteen foot square of back garden in Park Avenue South, it had an orchard and even an outdoor swimming pool. Inside, it seemed in good repair, a thoroughly comfortable family home. Amazingly, it fell within our budget.

We excitedly confirmed our interest to the estate agent, and resolved to check out the local schools before making a formal offer. On the long drive back to London, we stopped off at the home of a colleague of mine, who lived in Bradford-on-Avon and had invited us for lunch. 'Frome?' he said, when we told him about the house we'd seen. 'You do know that it's the incest capital of Europe?'

I have since heard this calumny directed at many places, both in Britain and abroad. Folk who live in Lockjaw, Alabama, will tell you that Hare Lip, six miles west, is the incest capital of America. But talk to the good people of Hare Lip and they will assure you that it is nearby Lockjaw where you are likely to see a brother and sister walking a pram containing a baby with its head on backwards. Someone I know recently defamed Much Wenlock in Shropshire in a similar manner. 'It is widely known,' said my informant conspiratorially, 'as Much Bedlock.'

It seems to be the fate of every other rural town to be known as the incest capital of Europe, if only by people in the neighbouring rural town, and even though nobody can ever supply any firm evidence, either in the form of hard statistics or misshapen townsfolk. Perhaps in Frome they insist that the dubious distinction belongs to Bradford-on-Avon. Whatever, I'm ashamed to say that I took my friend at his word. We joked that the town should have a sign saying 'Welcome to Frome – Twinned with Itself'. And I knew then that the hunt for a suitable house would have to resume.

What we considered suitable was this: a sizeable family house with a large garden, in a small market town or on the picturesque outskirts of an attractive city, with a decent primary school nearby. We didn't want to live in the sticks. We compiled endless lists of the pros and cons of moving out of London, and the pros and cons of staying put. Less pollution v. less culture; fewer muggings v. fewer restaurants; Arsenal, as our local football team, v. Middle Wallop Rangers.

Not least of the criteria we set ourselves was that the house had to be within walking-distance of a café with a cappuccino machine. In Crouch End I could set out from home in any direction and within fifteen minutes a gurgling cappuccino machine would be serenading me. When you work at home, on your own, such trivialities assume great importance.

Not that I was always at home. My editors at the Mail on Sunday kept coming up with offbeat projects for me, one of which, in May 1997, was to find out more about those curiously old-fashioned advertisements, which since 1961 had been appearing prominently in national newspapers headlined 'Does Your Memory Fail You?' or 'IQ of 145 And Can't Remember?'.

With the kind of tenacious journalistic initiative that enabled Woodward and Bernstein to rumble the Watergate cover-up, I discovered that the ads were placed by a company called R. & W. Heap, based in Marple, near Stockport. R. & W. Heap offered correspondence courses in mnemonics, a system of remembering things based on acronyms (such as the indubitably memorable PHAFF), word association and imagery.

Anyway, I phoned Bob Heap, the managing director, who said that he would be delighted to reveal more. He suggested that I catch a train to Macclesfield, Cheshire, where he would collect me and drive me to his office in Marple. He also said that after seeing my face for the first time, he would never, ever forget my name, thanks to his foolproof technique of making absurdist visual connections in order never, ever, to forget names. To lock Brian Viner into his memory he would visualise vines tumbling out of my brain, and the sight of my face thereafter would always trigger that image in his mind. I told myself that I'd prefer it if he just forgot my name.

Funnily enough, if I walked past Bob Heap in the street now, I'd never remember him. A woman giving a little curtsy on top of a mound of compost might come into focus... but no, I would not be able to remember why. The journey in his car from Macclesfield to Marple, on the other hand, I recall vividly. I was enraptured. It was a glorious day in early summer and the countryside looked spectacular, especially considering its proximity to Manchester. We passed buttercup-strewn meadows, followed by steep, dramatic hills, and even a man repairing a dry-stone wall with a pipe clenched between his teeth. Which takes some doing, I can tell you. Anyway, I got home that evening and said to Jane: 'How about Cheshire?'

Thus it was that we made an offer on East Cottage, a rambling Victorian farmhouse in the village of Broken Cross just outside Macclesfield. It was owned by a frightfully posh couple who, in that frightfully posh way, had allowed it to get, in parts, ever so slightly derelict. But otherwise it seemed to fit the bill. It had a brick-built office outside where I could hole up cosily with my Apple Mac, and an appealingly scruffy garden of about an acre, with a charming old dovecote. (Note to anyone hoping to sell a house in the country to people fleeing the city: erect a dovecote... it will probably clinch the sale.)

We didn't spot any doves, but East Cottage did have several slaughtered pheasants hanging in the larder. We presumed the frightfully posh people would want to take the pheasants with them, but at least dead birds in the larder emphasised the semi-rural location. Best of all, there was a café round the corner with a brand-new cappuccino machine.

Amid great wailing and gnashing of teeth – slightly moist eyes, anyway – we put our home in Park Avenue South up for sale. Pretty soon we found buyers, a pleasant family whom I'll call the Roses even though that wasn't their name. The Roses loved our house, which we found faintly troubling because we were by no means sure that we wanted to leave it. But the move to Macclesfield appeared to make sense. We both had northern roots. Jane's parents lived just across the Pennines in South Yorkshire; I had grown up in Lancashire. We had friends in and around Manchester.

And getting from Macclesfield to London, by train if not through the Seventh Circle of Hell that is the M6, was a fairly straightforward business.

At first we bubbled with enthusiasm for the move. We put the children's names down for the King's School in Macclesfield, and at a Royal Television Society dinner I lurched up to Macclesfield-raised, King's School-educated Michael Jackson – not the troubled pop star but the then-chief executive of Channel 4 – and boldly informed him that I was going to live in his home town.

He looked at me with the mixture of incredulity and pity that you might get if you told someone you intended to challenge the world record for sitting in a barrel on top of a pole (currently 67 days and 14 minutes, of course). 'Great,' he said, humouring me. I slunk away. Jane's former colleague from Woman's Hour, Jenni Murray, was more encouraging. She loved her home in the hills outside Macclesfield, she assured Jane. On the other hand, it seemed significant that between Monday and Friday she lived in a pied-à-terre in Camden Town.

Slowly, my enthusiasm for Macclesfield began to wane. But whenever possible, I went back to reassure myself that we were doing the right thing. On one such visit, in December 1997, I had dinner with an old schoolfriend, Pete Venables, who lived in Wilmslow. I desperately wanted Pete to do a sales job on Cheshire, but he casually mentioned that he'd been in London the week before and had spent two cheery hours wandering around a beguilingly Christmassy Sloane Square.

'Wait a minute,' I said. 'You're supposed to be reassuring me that Cheshire is the place to be.'

'Oh it is,' he cried. 'I would never live anywhere else. And there are some fantastic retail parks opening up.'

Retail parks. Not since 'Open Sesame!' had two words had such a magical effect. The scales fell from my eyes and into my steak and kidney pie. Pete was a great guy, but I didn't want to live somewhere where retail parks were objects of ardour.

I tried to remain positive because I thought Jane was still keen. Besides, we'd already had a survey carried out on East Cottage, as had the Roses on our house in Park Avenue South. With the solicitor's fees, we had shelled out £1200. A date had been set for the exchange of contracts. But a few nights after my dinner with Pete, in an Italian restaurant on Upper Street in Islington, an area of London even trendier than Crouch End, my apprehension came spilling out.

We had just been to a pub-theatre, the King's Head, to see an actress friend, Sue Kelvin, perform a terrific one-woman show written by her husband, Chris Burgess. The lively cosmopolitanism of that evening, as well as the fact that Sue and Chris were friends, seemed to encapsulate everything we would be leaving behind. It wasn't that I no longer wanted to live in Cheshire, although I didn't. It was more that I wanted, with all my heart, to stay in London. To hell with the pollution, the traffic, the litter, the graffiti, the crime, and queuing to get into and then out of Ikea on the North Circular Road... they were just the horrid cumulative product of lots and lots

of people. And lots and lots of people also meant shops, restaurants, cinemas, theatres, concerts, museums. Fabulous, life-enhancing things.

As it turned out, Jane had been feeling exactly the same. She had suppressed her doubts because she thought I was intent on making the move. Relief washed over us. We finished our pizzas quattro formaggio and ordered a celebratory tiramisu to share. It was official. We were post-metropausal. East Cottage and the building work it required need bother us no more. When some friends joked that we might have wound up in Broken Cross both broke 'n' cross, we howled the maniacal laughter of condemned prisoners offered a last-minute reprieve.

There remained, however, the difficulty of telling the frightfully posh couple and, worse, the Roses, that we were pulling out of the deal and therefore committing a crime considered by most estate agents to be on a par with mass murder, if not marginally worse: wilfully breaking the purchasing chain. So we made the cowardly decision to fib. We said that my work commitments had changed, requiring us to stay in London. Through their disappointment, the Roses understood. And would have remained understanding, despite having spent over £1000 for a full structural survey, had I not done something insensitive and stupid.

I still wrote a monthly lifestyle column in the Ham & High, and a few weeks later decided to write about our volte-face – a very Hampstead expression, after all. Naively, I assumed that the Roses, who lived in another part of the city, would never see it. But I knew it would go down a storm in north London, where people like to read that north London is a better place to live than anywhere else on the planet, and absolutely lap up stories about people who pull back from the brink of moving to the country, in favour of staying near Hampstead Heath.

A week later I got an angry letter from Mrs Rose. Some friends had sent them my column. We had told them one thing yet I had written another, she complained, and they were considerably out of pocket as a result of our seemingly whimsical change of mind. It was a fair cop.

Had we been nobler of spirit, and deeper of pocket, we might have offered to recompense them. As it was, I apologised and that was that. Except that the Roses then bought a house in a neighbouring road and overnight we started seeing them everywhere. In the park, on the bus, in the butcher's, in the medical centre... always there was either Mr or Mrs Rose, gazing at us reproachfully and then looking away as soon as our eyes met.

Whenever we stopped in the car at a zebra crossing, they were the ones crossing it. When we walked across a zebra crossing, they were the ones waiting in the car, probably suppressing the instinct to slam down the accelerator and wipe us out. Even in my own home I started opening the toilet door tentatively. If we had taken a cruise round the Galapagos Islands, and alighted on a remote beach, the dark shape in the distance would not have been a giant turtle, it would have been Mr Rose. In Marks & Spencer on Muswell Hill Broadway, it was never Victoria Wood or Alison Steadman reaching for the same Parsnip and Gruyère Bake as me. It was always a frowning Mrs Rose.

Still, apart from being haunted by the Roses, we were happy to have recommitted ourselves to Crouch End. We threw ourselves into school fund-raising activities with renewed vigour. I started visiting a different café every day for my mid-morning cappuccino, just because I could. One day, I even ordered a treble decaff skinny peanut-butter double-jointed latte, or something of the sort, not because I truly desired it, but for the sheer Crouch Endness of it.

A couple of happy years went by. But gradually it began to dawn on us that the urge to leave London, the urge we had thought dead and buried, was reawakening. All the old desires we had consigned to our shiny, green London Borough of Haringey recycling bin – more space for the kids, more space for us, more space for the car, less litter, less graffiti, less crime, less pressurised schools – bubbled back to the surface.

Moreover, in October 2001 I would be forty. Some people buy leather trousers when they approach forty, others get a body-part pierced. I wanted to experience life in a different region of England (and maybe get a body-part pierced as well). Also, our daughter Eleanor was approaching secondary school age, and by then we felt it would be unfair to remove her from an environment she knew so well. If we were ever going to leave London, it had to be soon.

We more or less randomly earmarked three counties – Suffolk, Wiltshire and Worcestershire – and began the tiresome process of registering with estate agents. Over the next few months I became a property details junkie, hardly able to get through the morning without ingesting yet more details of moulded cornicing, dado rails, decorative architraves, chimney recesses, Belfast sink units and inglenook fireplaces. And what merriment we got from those property details, with their odd phrasing and indiscriminate use of capital letters. These things really shouldn't be left to estate agents. One house in Suffolk boasted 'a Norman Spiral staircase'; either a spiral staircase dating back to the Normans, or a staircase designed by the renowned architect Norman Spiral. We couldn't quite be sure.

Another place, in Wiltshire, was 'wonderfully located for access to virtually all points of the compass'. It was the 'virtually' that intrigued me. What could it mean? Were north, south and east within easy reach, but west an absolute no-no?

I became a reluctant expert in estate agents' jargon, with its championing of the euphemism. 'This property offers an excellent degree of versatility' meant, in short, a wreck. After a while I began to enjoy their efforts to sex up some obscure literary or historical connection. My favourite was: 'Crown House has recently undergone an extensive and sympathetic restoration programme, having been occupied previously for 106 years by the niece of Logie Baird.'

This begged several urgent questions, none of which the agent could answer. Had the niece of John Logie Baird, inventor of the television set, really lived in the house for 106 years? If so, was it some kind of record? What had she done that made an extensive restoration programme so necessary? And did she watch much telly? We'll probably never know.

Eventually, in summer 2001, after many weekend excursions up the M11 and along the M4 to look at houses, we found the place we wanted. Not merely wanted, in fact, but craved. Channing House (not its real name, for reasons that will become clear) was an elegant Georgian town house, a former coaching inn with a charming cobbled courtyard, in the attractive market town of Pershore, Worcestershire.

Channing House stood on the town's main thoroughfare, which was a bit of a drawback, as there seemed to be juggernauts rumbling by every two minutes. But the twenty-first century drawbacks rubbed shoulders with some stunning eighteenth-century features, among them a wonderful Georgian staircase. What seduced us above all, however, was a long and extraordinarily lovely garden, stretching down to a peaceful stretch of the River Avon. That, more than the proximity of heavy-goods vehicles, might have been why the house was just about affordable: the prospect every few winters of the River Avon peacefully flowing through the kitchen.

But to own that garden would be worth the odd flood, we thought. There was statuary and topiary, formal bits and wild bits, water features and archways, a ramshackle but characterful old greenhouse, and even a wooden landing stage. We were enchanted.

We were also, in retrospect, bonkers. It was all we could do to keep on top of our small patch of garden in London, which required about twenty minutes of attention every other week. The Channing House garden needed at least two hours a day of hoeing, mowing, weeding and feeding. Admittedly there was a trusty old gardener with a flat tweed cap surgically attached, but we weren't at all sure that we could afford him. Even if we could, it was a house for Mr and Mrs Monty Don or Mr and Mrs Alan Titchmarsh or Mr and Mrs Bob Flowerdew, not for the likes of us.

So naturally we made an offer. The house was owned by an amiable family called Powell, who had made a lot of money in agricultural machinery and literally had their eyes on pastures new – mother and daughter were keen riders and they wanted a place where they could graze a few ponies.

They were asking marginally less for Channing House than the value of our Park Avenue South house, thanks to the unstoppable gentrification of Crouch End.

The Powells accepted our offer, as long we could quickly exchange contracts. We felt sure we could. Our estate agent, a short, doughy guy called Michael – the kind of man who would be supplied by Central Casting if you asked them to send you a spiv of extreme, over-the-top spivishness – told us that our house would definitely sell within forty-eight hours of our putting it up for sale. We put it up for sale. A week later he said: 'It's very odd that there's been no interest. There seems to have been a sudden downturn in the market.'

We kept calling the Powells to assure them that we were committed to the purchase, and returned several times to Channing House to plan exciting things like whose bedroom would be whose, as well as to check out the nearest cappuccino outlet.

The only thing that seriously troubled me about Channing House was that the splendid Georgian staircase wound around a splendid Georgian stairwell, with a drop from top to bottom of at least fifty feet. Let us leave Worcestershire for a moment, and venture to southern Spain's lovely Costa de la Luz. Two years earlier, while on holiday there, little Jacob had fallen head first out of a restaurant window. We had been having a merry lunch with some friends when, unnoticed by any of us, Jacob somehow manoeuvred his chair over to the open window. By the time I looked over, less than a minute after I had last smiled at him chattering at the table, all I saw was a flash of blue sandals and yellow socks as he toppled out.

The window was forty feet high, overlooking a beach. But there was rock beneath it, not sand. I hope I never experience a more agonising thirty seconds than those it took me to dash down the steps, certain that he would at the very least be badly injured.

The sound of him crying was like a choir of angels; it meant he wasn't unconscious or worse. There was a crowd of aghast Spaniards around him, and a woman holding him. By some miracle he was unharmed, apart from nasty grazing. Apparently, if you're going to survive a fall out of a forty-foot-high window, it's best of all to be a cat, but otherwise to be very drunk or very young, because drunk people and small children don't stiffen in anticipation of impact. Even so, we kept hearing the Spanish word *milagro*, meaning miracle, and it did seem like a kind of miracle. When we returned to the same spot a few days later, we half-expected to find a shrine to the Virgin Mary.

But just as miraculous to us was that within fifteen minutes of the accident, there was an ambulance on the scene with a paediatrician on board. This was a tiny fishing village, an hour's drive from the port of Cádiz, which was the nearest settlement of any size. Had a similar accident befallen a Spanish toddler in a remote fishing village in England, it was hard to imagine an ambulance turning up inside quarter of an hour, let alone a paediatrician. On the other hand, in England the window would probably have been shut. We were asked if we wanted to take legal action against the restaurant, but we blamed only ourselves for being less vigilant than usual; a common phenomenon, I have since been told, on family holidays, especially family holidays in Spain, where you see two-year-olds on the backs of mopeds.

Jacob's accident had made me neurotic about the danger of small children falling from great heights. But in the case of Channing House I tackled this neurosis by mentally positioning a big squidgy sofa at the bottom of the stairwell. Not the prospect of flooding, nor the obvious perils to small children of a river at the bottom of the garden, nor even my own particular dread of heights, eroded my conviction that this was where I wanted to live. And Jane felt the same.

We registered the children with a nearby primary school. I even looked into the cost of a second-hand dinghy with an outboard motor, and daydreamed of chugging along the Avon with three happy kids, a wicker hamper and a dog very much like Timmy in the Famous Five books. All we needed, for the wind to start stirring our willows, was a buyer for Park Avenue South.

Meanwhile, the Powells' estate agent – a pukka, rather superior chap from Knight Frank, who hardly seemed to come from the same planet, let alone the same profession as Michael – or 'Sudden Downturn' as we now called him – casually told us that there was interest in Channing House from another party, who had offered more than us, but seemingly wanted the house only as a second home. The other party did not need a bank loan, he added. They were cash buyers, and by implication, considerably richer than us.

'But Mr and Mrs Powell would rather sell the property to you,' he assured us. Evidently, they wanted Channing House to be a full-time family home. It would effectively be ours as soon as we could fix a date for the exchange of contracts.

We would happily have fixed a date for the exchange of bodily fluids, never mind contracts. But no buyer materialised. On 10 September 2001, we talked to the bank about a bridging loan. On September 11, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center were destroyed. If there's ever a good time to take out a bridging loan, and I'm not sure there is, it's plainly not in the aftermath of an apocalypse. A few weeks later the man from Knight Frank phoned to say that the Powells felt compelled to sell Channing House to the other interested party.

We were devastated. Obviously, September 11 lent some valuable perspective to those feelings of devastation – friends of friends had died – but Channing House had seemed so perfect. We could hardly bear to think of someone else moving in.

Bizarrely, that someone else turned out to be the former pop star Toyah Wilcox. A woman who had lent her voice to Teletubbies, as Toyah had, could lay claim to reserves of goodwill that in our house would never entirely evaporate. Nevertheless, she plunged in our estimation. If we had had any of her records, we would have ritually jumped on them. So when later she appeared in a six-page spread in OK! magazine, pictured in her beautiful Worcestershire garden alongside the glorious River Avon, she very quickly acquired a bushy moustache, silly glasses and horns. It was the least we could do.

In the meantime, sympathetic friends and relatives told us that the loss of Channing House was clearly meant to be, that things would turn out for the best. We smiled wanly, like the newly bereaved being told that time is a great healer.

I know, it's preposterous to compare our emotions to feelings of bereavement. But anyone who has set their heart on owning a property, and then seen the deal fall through, will understand what I mean. There was once an episode of Coronation Street in which Hilda Ogden coped stoically with the death of her idle but beloved husband Stan, then broke down when she opened his spectacles case. For us, for a couple of weeks, the Channing House particulars were Stan Ogden's spectacles case.

And just to rub it in, those Toyah Wilcox interviews kept on coming. It seemed as if we could hardly open a magazine or newspaper lifestyle supplement without reading about her fabulous house and garden.

However, she did say that she had visited the house in her childhood when it was a tearoom, and that when she had again walked through the door 'I just burst into tears; I knew we had to live here.' Fair enough, I thought. Maybe she wanted it even more than we did. Besides, she had been able to fill the garden with sculptures, including (I read) a life-sized terracotta warrior on a horse given to her for Christmas by her husband Robert Fripp, of the rock group King Crimson. That was far more in keeping with such a magnificent garden than the small terracotta plant pot, not including a horse, that I might have given Jane as a Christmas present.

Once again we shelved our plans to leave London. My fortieth birthday came and went without me living in a small market town or even getting anything pierced. But we continued to receive property particulars, mainly because we couldn't be bothered to let the agents know we had stopped looking, and on a cold January morning in 2002, unenthusiastically opened a buff envelope containing details of a house in Herefordshire called Docklow Grange.

We realised instantly that the desire to leave London, which we had again thought dead, was again only dormant. It surfaced once more when we read the details of Docklow Grange. Yet the house failed our criteria on several important counts. For one thing, it was in the middle of the sticks. Docklow was a dot on the road to the Welsh Marches between Bromyard and Leominster. A walk to get a cappuccino on a winter's day would require thermal long johns, a compass and probably an ice pick. Besides, we had never even vaguely considered Herefordshire. It seemed much too far from London. Much too far from everywhere.

For another thing, Docklow Grange was way more than we could afford. In 1999 I had moved from the Mail on Sunday to become a columnist and interviewer for the Independent. They paid me well, and I also had a reasonable freelance income, through interviewing famous people for the Radio Times and Sainsbury's Magazine. But the price of Docklow Grange was laughably higher than whatever we could muster by selling our house, our car, our life insurance policies, Jane's body and even my cherished collection of Shell 1970 World Cup coins. Unfortunately, we couldn't expel the place from our minds.

The photographs made it look immensely handsome, a large, ivy-clad, early Victorian house, almost certainly with a resident ghost. It also came with nearly five acres of grounds and three adjacent self-catering holiday cottages, which made us wonder whether we might be able to buy just the house and grounds, and leave the cottages out of the package, bringing the price almost within reach. We phoned the agent – Grays of Ludlow, in Shropshire. They confirmed that the owners, Mr and Mrs Openshaw, could possibly be persuaded to sell the house on its own. We made an appointment.

On 17 February 2002, just after 3 p.m., we turned for the first time into the drive of Docklow Grange, the house that was to become our home.

It was a miserable day. The journey from London had taken over three hours, including the inevitable pause to let the Roses, the family who had almost bought our house in Crouch End four years earlier, troop across a zebra crossing. The

windscreen wipers had been swishing to and fro the whole way, fighting a persistent drizzle. It was not a good day to view a property. On the other hand, there could hardly be a better day. If it appealed to us on a dreary February afternoon then what pleasures might it offer on a warm day in June?

Mr and Mrs Openshaw turned out to be a couple in their early sixties, who had lived in Docklow Grange for twenty-three years, raising two children there. They manifestly treasured the place and we could understand why. Inside it was huge, rambling and brimming with character, with enough original features to make an estate agent swoon. The particulars had promised 'magnificent' mouldings and the mouldings did not disappoint. The particulars also promised a butler's silver safe, and there it was, a nineteenth-century strongroom with a vast iron door. And parliament hinges – colossal hinges that enable heavy oak double-doors to open flat against the wall. Mr Openshaw showed me his parliament hinges in the same rhetorical what-do-you-think-of-that? manner with which some men show other men a new tattoo, or a trick involving the foreskin.

We stayed for over two hours, hugely engaged by the Openshaws, the house and the dim prospect of living there. The house had a faded grandeur, albeit faded, in some places, to the point of invisibility. There were cracks in the ceilings. There was woodworm. Mr Openshaw was a heavy smoker and the walls were stained with nicotine. It needed a new kitchen. It needed rewiring. It needed redecorating. Heaven knew what else it needed. And yet we were smitten, as much by the outside as the inside, even in the drizzle. Unusually if not uniquely in the world of estate agents' particulars, the photographs undersold the place.

The red sandstone house, built circa 1850, stood at the heart of a hamlet of eleven cottages, most of which were clustered around an ancient stone cider press. At the back of the house was a formal lawn with an old stone font in the middle of it, a croquet lawn and dense woodland. In the woodland were two enormous wellingtonia trees, particularly fine specimens according to Mr Openshaw, and marking the western boundary of the grounds there was a delightful ha-ha – which incidentally is defined in my Reader's Digest Universal Dictionary as 'a walled ditch... sunk in the ground to serve as a fence without impairing the view', its name, and this is the bit I really like, deriving from expressions of 'surprise at finding such an unexpected obstacle'. In other words, it could just as easily have been called a bugger-me.

Beyond the ha-ha there was a spellbinding view towards the Black Mountains, spellbinding even in the drizzle. In the foreground was open farmland, yet it looked more like rolling parkland. There were two plantations of birch, beech, ash, horse chestnut and sycamore trees, and the glint of a pond or a lake beyond them. Around the other side of the house there were a couple of peacocks strutting around, and an elderly Muscovy duck standing solemnly in the shadow of an old clocktower. There was also, yes, a dovecote. And a Gilbert Scott telephone box. It was utterly charming, almost a caricature of rural England in bygone times. Had David Jason as Pop Larkin come strolling round the corner, rubbing his hands and saying 'perfick', we would not have batted an eyelid between us.