



THE COUNTRY HOUSE
HANDBOOK

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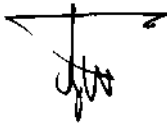
Expert tips on how to cut the cost of running a country property

Welcome to the first edition of the Country House Handbook. Inside, you will find helpful advice on every aspect of owning and enjoying your country home. There are expert insights into safeguarding the value of your property, as well as smart ways to make the most of your land, whether it's a small paddock or a working farm.

We also ask owners of some of the country's most prized homes – houses that have been listed because of their architectural or historical importance – about the pleasures and perils of owning a part of Britain's heritage.

Along with practical advice, you'll discover the latest thinking about the country house market. We reveal the true spending power of the London buyer who wants to purchase a country house – the findings may well surprise you – and identify the best value locations around Britain. We also find out why some houses sell and others stick, even in an improving market, and give insider tips on how to move your home into the property fast lane.

I hope you find the Country House Handbook useful. Please get in touch if you would like to discuss any of the issues we have covered.



James Mackenzie, Head of Country Department
020 7318 5190, james.mackenzie@struttandparker.com

THE LONDON POUND

Swapping London for the country boosts the value of your property pound. Chris Alden reveals the exchange rate

Compared with the rest of the UK, London often feels like a different country. It votes differently, it thinks differently – and with the average detached house in Inner London currently worth £1,537,232, according to exclusive research by Strutt & Parker, its property market has gone its own way, too.

House prices in London are now higher, relative to the rest of the country, than they have ever been, reports Nationwide. So if you are thinking of selling a house in London and buying the country home you have always dreamed of, congratulations: you are in a uniquely strong position – it's almost as if you hold a different currency.

Every currency, of course, needs an exchange rate. By comparing the price of the average detached home in Inner London with the rest of the UK, we have come up with a rate showing the true value the 'London pound' across the country.

By this measure, the London pound is worth anything from £3 in the Cotswolds to £5 in the West Country to a staggering £9 in the Highlands and Islands – making it a very hard currency indeed.

When it comes to maximising the value of London property, the exchange rate grows in concentric rings around the capital.

'In the commuter-belt locations, such as St Albans or Guildford, the London pound is worth £2,' explains Stephanie McMahon of Strutt & Parker's Research Department. 'To reach the £3 mark – tripling your purchasing power – you have to go further out to the classic spots such as Hampshire, South Oxfordshire and the Cotswolds.'

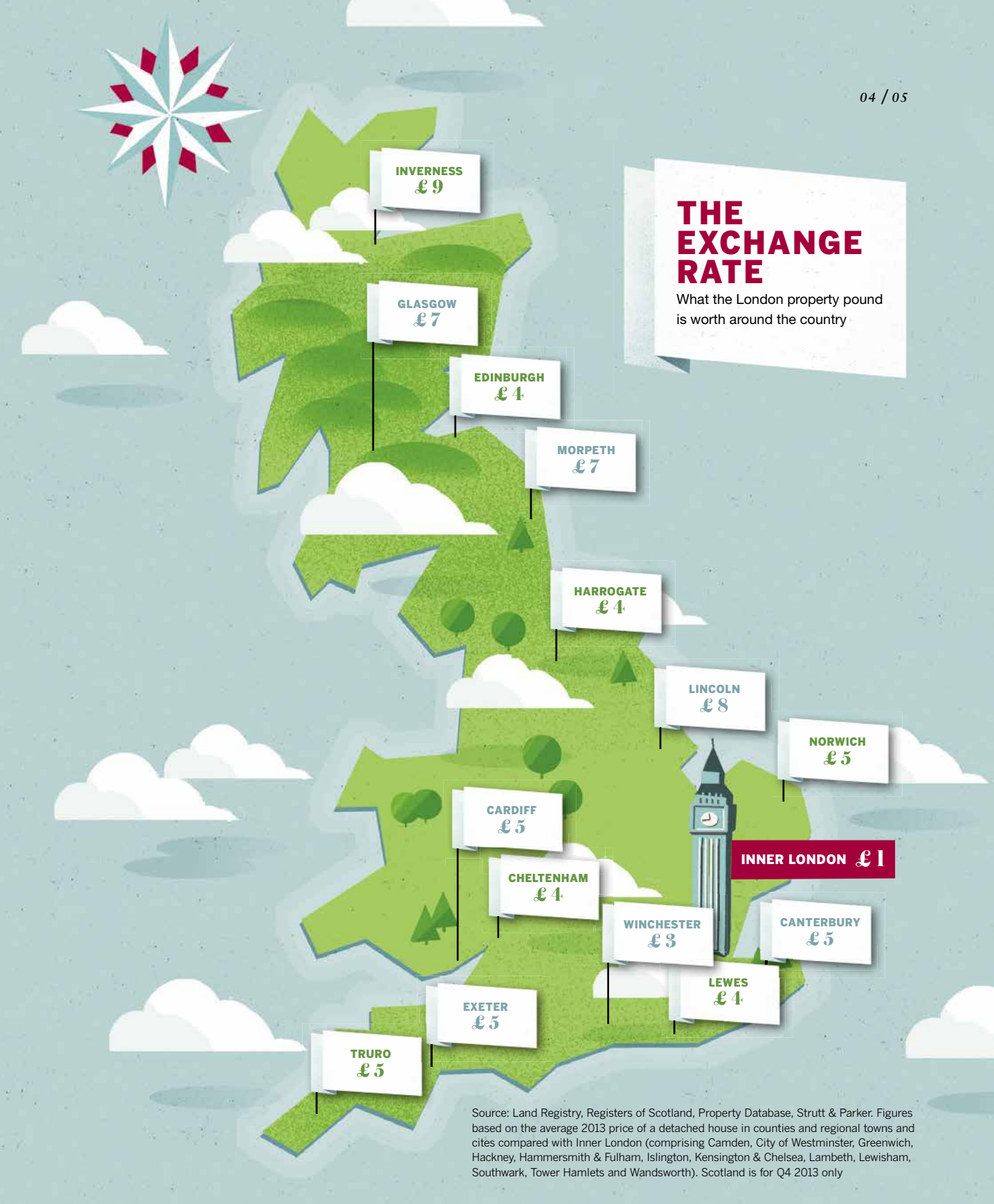
It's a longer commute, but the trade-off is a very attractive one. Sell a £2-million, four-bedroom terrace in Battersea with a patio garden, for example, and you can buy a historic home in the Cotswolds with several acres to enjoy.

'We sold more properties over £2 million in the Cotswolds than anywhere else in the country last year,' notes James Mackenzie, who is Head of Strutt & Parker's Country Department. 'And those were mostly to Londoners moving out.'

ON THE MOVE

The London pound exchange rate can alter over time, mostly because of upgrades to the transport links to the capital. It is something that smart buyers will keep an eye on.

For example, the A3 Hindhead Tunnel recently opened up south Hampshire, while the modernisation of the Great Western ►



main line should cut 20 minutes off a train journey to the West Country by 2017.

‘Suddenly locations such as Bath, Chippenham and Swindon, and anywhere within 20–30 minutes of those, become much more desirable,’ says Mackenzie.

A QUESTION OF VALUE

There are still niche areas that offer excellent value, along with some of the country’s most attractive scenery.

In the Mendip Hills, just south of Bristol, the Malvern Hills, the Suffolk coast and the Derbyshire Dales, the London pound is worth £5. But the trade-off is longer journey times to London, which may

mean taking on a weekly commute or working from home one day a week.

One oddity in the £5 bracket is Canterbury, which is less than an hour from St Pancras on the High Speed 1 line. ‘I was very surprised to see Canterbury looking such good value,’ says McMahon. ‘It’s the same price level as the West Country, but much closer to London.’

What makes Canterbury doubly notable is that in similar historic cities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, the London pound is worth just £2.

‘Oxford and Cambridge have almost become prime property areas in their own right,’ says Mackenzie. ‘They are popular because they have all the benefits of city living with few of the downsides, and they are commutable to London.’

In that context, Canterbury seems even better value, but as Mackenzie points out: ‘A lot of people don’t think about Kent first, but perhaps they should.’

DIVIDING LINE

What is less surprising is evidence of a marked north-south divide. The London pound is worth £6–£7, on average, in most regions of the UK from the Midlands northwards. The exception is northeast Scotland, where it’s worth just £5, buoyed by oil-rich Aberdeen.

But will the London pound exchange rate remain so attractive for long? ‘During a recovery, London always seems to lead the way,’ says Matthew Pointon, Property Economist at Capital Economics. ‘This time it’s bigger than normal. Given how far

prices are out of line with earnings in London, compared with the north for example, we are forecasting a catch-up for northern regions as London cools. But the gap is going to be there for some time.’

Steve Westbrook, Director of the Economic Intelligence Unit at the University of the Highlands and Islands, agrees. In his region, the London pound is worth more than anywhere else in the country. He points out that big price moves in the Highlands tend to be ‘a year or two behind’ the rest of the UK.

‘The further away you are, the more time it can take to spread out,’ he explains. ‘The remoter parts of the Highlands take a bit longer than, say, Inverness.’

Taking both views together, there is clearly the potential for a ‘ripple effect’ of price rises heading out from London and reaching across the regions.

PRIME TIME

Finally, if you think the London pound is valuable, think yourself especially lucky if you have a property in the prime boroughs of Westminster and Kensington & Chelsea, which have outperformed even the wider London market. The ‘prime London pound’ is the most valuable property currency of all. It is worth £8 in Greater London, £17 in the southwest, £24 in Yorkshire and an astonishing £27 in Wales.

So if you’re thinking of escaping to the unspoiled Welsh countryside, now may be the time. But if you’re moving from Caerphilly to Kensington, you’d better start saving up. ●

THE BUYERS CLUB

The most active purchasers in the country market

URBAN UPSIZERS: London families with young children, who are typically looking for houses in village locations near good schools.

RETURNING EXPATS: These buyers usually come back to the UK having already made their money through successful corporate careers or selling a business. They are searching for the ideal location, setting and house.

LUXURY WEEKENDERS: London-based buyers who want a smaller country house to use as a weekend bolthole. ‘They might spend £1.5 million –£3 million on a lovely house that has none of the worries of a bigger property,’ says Luke Morgan of Strutt & Parker’s Country House Department.

OVERSEAS BUYERS: Luxury is the watchword for the international set. If it’s a rural bolthole or a £10-million mansion, the property has to be in perfect condition.

THE EXTRA FACTOR

Three elements that earn a premium from buyers

VIEWS: Uninterrupted views are highly prized, especially if there’s no chance of the view being spoiled. ‘Having really good sea frontage and owning that frontage commands a particular premium,’ explains Malcolm Leslie of Strutt & Parker’s Edinburgh office.

HERITAGE: A house with original features and a story to tell is attractive to buyers.

Anything that has the word ‘castle’ in it lifts the property into a different class.

COUNTRY SPORTS: Fishing and shooting rights add considerable value. ‘I once sold a fairly standard four-bedroom cottage set in about seven acres, ordinarily worth about £450,000–£500,000,’ says Leslie. ‘It went for roughly a 40% premium of that figure because it came with two salmon pools.’

| CURRENCY CONVERTER | |
|---|-----|
| The value of the London pound by region | |
| INNER LONDON | £1 |
| EAST MIDLANDS | £7 |
| EAST OF ENGLAND | £4 |
| NORTH EAST | £7 |
| NORTH WEST | £6 |
| SCOTLAND | £6 |
| (SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS | £9) |
| SOUTH EAST | £4 |
| SOUTH WEST | £5 |
| (COTSWOLDS | £3) |
| WALES | £7 |
| WEST MIDLANDS | £6 |
| YORKSHIRE AND HUMBER | £6 |

‘It is important not to ignore areas that are essential for the wellbeing of the house. At the very top of the list is the roof’

THE PROTECTION SQUAD

Chris Partridge reveals four simple steps to help preserve and enhance the value of your country home

1 CHOOSE WHAT YOU IMPROVE
When it comes to creating value, expensive amenities (such as swimming pools and sports complexes) are rarely good investments. They usually cost much more to build than the value they add to a property. Swimming pools, in particular, sometimes actively deter buyers who can see them as expensive to maintain and a potential hazard for children. The best amenities exploit existing and possibly unused structures. Outbuildings that can provide guest accommodation, games and media rooms or additional office space are ideal.

2 COME UP WITH A PLAN
Development can add a valuable income stream or provide a lump sum. But it is important to work with professionals to identify development opportunities that don't affect the overall value of the property. That means preserving privacy, by keeping development away from the main house, and thinking through access requirements for any new residential buildings. It is best to have an overall plan so that you don't take decisions now that restrict development opportunities later on. Also, there is a time limit on planning permission, so it is important not to seek permission before you have a clear idea about completing the project.

3 BE HIGH MAINTENANCE
Regular maintenance is the simplest way to preserve the value of a country home. 'It's much easier to have a maintenance schedule than to try to play catch-up after a number of years,' says Mark McAndrew of Strutt & Parker's Estates and Farm Agency. 'That means keeping an eye on the paintwork, the state of the drive and surrounding gardens.' It is also important not to ignore those areas that, although you can't see them, are essential for the wellbeing of the house. At the very top of the list is the roof, as a lack of repairs here can cause the most damage.

4 GET CONNECTED
Two of the questions most frequently asked by country house buyers are: is there broadband and can I get a mobile signal? Communication technology is seen as a utility, not a luxury. Ideally, the signal from your hub should extend across the whole house. Wireless signals can be obstructed by thick stone walls, so it can be worth getting a survey to eliminate any 'not-spots'. If the house is in an area affected by slow broadband, you may be able to lobby BT to install a fibre-optic line to the nearest village. An alternative is to get together with your neighbours to pay for the creation of a shared wireless network – an approach that has become increasingly popular in rural areas. ●

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Owning a listed house is both a pleasure and a responsibility, as *Clive Aslet* discovers

From Georgian stately homes to Victorian rectories, the country houses at which Britain excels come in many different shapes, dates and materials. But one thing unites the very finest of them: they are certain to be listed. That means their architectural or historical importance has been officially recognised and given statutory protection at one of three increasingly rigorous levels: Grade II, Grade II* or Grade I.

Listing is not an unqualified boon for the owner – with recognition comes responsibility and bureaucracy. But the designation is an accolade for the building.

‘By definition, if you buy a listed house, you have bought one of the best houses in Britain,’ says Sandy Mitchell, Director of RedBook Agency, which advises clients on architecture and design. ‘Owners of listed houses form a de facto club, ready to compare notes on their architectural joys and tribulations.’

New owners have to love a listed home for what it is and accept the limitations it imposes. But they shouldn’t despair of bringing the house into the 21st century.

‘Listing doesn’t freeze a property in time,’ says Nicola Craddock of Strutt & Parker’s Country House Department,

who points out that even Grade I Listed homes can be adapted, provided that the architectural features are preserved.

‘Owners enjoy buying into history. A number of them, who before may not have been interested in older houses, find that they become experts in the history of their property.’

LIVING HISTORY

But what do the owners themselves think? I spoke to a number of them, some of whom preferred not to be named, to find out what it is really like looking after a piece of Britain’s history.

For some, dealing with the rules and regulations has not been as onerous as they expected. The owner of a very large, architecturally glamorous Grade I Listed house in East Anglia has spent 20 years restoring its 18th-century glories, while also creating a home in which he and his wife could bring up their family.

He’s emphatic that the conservation officers have never been anything but helpful and maintains that he has never been unreasonably refused permission for his plans. The key to this happy relationship has been consultation. By engaging the interest and sympathy of ►



‘By definition, if you buy a listed house, you have bought one of the best houses in Britain’



the planners before every new phase of work, he has won their confidence.

Not everyone finds the process such plain sailing. In Kent, Amicia and Richard Oldfield have been unable to enclose the swimming pool at Doddington Place. Since they have spent 30 years restoring the house and estate to the condition of its Victorian heyday, the refusal seems less than generous by the planners.

'We can't do anything to the house,' Amicia Oldfield admits cheerfully. 'But that doesn't matter because we don't want to change it.'

Not everyone is so philosophical. The necessarily slow process of building work, done to the highest standards, combined with the strict views of a conservation officer, can strain the patience of new purchasers.

'I was ready to throw in the towel,' confides one owner of a Grade I Listed country house. 'I said to my wife, "Let's sell and get somewhere without all this hassle." It was two years before one brick could be laid on top of another.'

Experience suggests that the gloom usually disperses when the work has finished. Even this owner has forgotten the battles with the planners and is now a very proud country house owner.

ASK THE EXPERTS

Taking expert advice can help to minimise the frustrations. Architects are often asked to give their opinion about the adaptability of old houses before purchase. This will give potential buyers an insight into what they are taking on.

New owners should also be realistic about timescales. Successful entrepreneurs and business people aren't always known for their patience, but they need to be aware of the time required to negotiate plans with conservation officers, whose

numbers may have been depleted by local authority cuts. Treat them with the respect that is their due. They're usually responsive to expert knowledge when they are presented with it. Clients may find that the specialists they have employed are more experienced than the conservation officers with whom they deal. This can be a trump card, as long as it's played with tact.

ROOM TO GROW

When it comes to modernising the property, it's essential to be flexible. Every age makes its own demands on the dwellings it inhabits. In the 21st century, the dominant room type is the family kitchen, where cooking, homework, dining and television-watching all take place. Other rooms – studies, offices and home cinemas – may be added to it to form a suite.

A good architect will be able to find the right space for these requirements within a historic house, but compromises may have to be made. Service wings are the obvious location, but if the family kitchen is to be in the heart of the house, a reception room may have to be sacrificed – triggering a debate with the conservation officer.

Sandy Mitchell was inspired to establish RedBook Agency as a result of his own trials in restoring a listed farmhouse in Berkshire. He is now convinced that work on a listed building needn't necessarily take longer than one on an unlisted structure or a new-build home.

Looking back on what, at the time, seemed an unending story of delay and exasperation, he is now able to take a cheerful view. 'You can be sure you'll have a fund of good dinner party stories at the end of it,' he says with a grin. ●

Clive Aslet is Editor at Large of Country Life

ON THE LIST

What should sellers and buyers be aware of when dealing with a listed property?

Buyers are rarely prepared to 'take a view' on missing documentation. 'For a successful sale, vendors must be sure that their historic building's log book is up to date,' says Tim Page-Ratcliff of Strutt & Parker's Lewes office.

They must also be prepared for detailed questions about any alterations that require listed building consent. If this wasn't obtained, getting retrospective consent can take a long time, leading to sales falling through.

As for buyers, it's essential that they employ a vigilant, experienced solicitor. 'A premium attaches to historic houses,' says Page-Ratcliff. 'But the principle of caveat emptor still applies.'

HIDDEN GEMS

Some of the country's most desirable properties never reach the open market

'It's quite common for really impressive properties to be sold privately,' says Charlie Evans of Strutt & Parker's Salisbury Office. 'Vendors don't want the intrusion of people coming around.'

Relationships form the basis of a successful private transaction. 'We might get to know a vendor several years ahead of the sale,' he reveals.

Similarly, the better buyers know their estate agent, the more likely it is they will be told when the ideal house is about to come to the market. 'We sometimes liken it to a dating agency,' explains Evans. 'It's our job discreetly to bring sellers and buyers together.'

TORTOISES AND HARES

Graham Norwood finds out why some country houses sell quickly while others get left behind

The market for country houses and estates is in better shape than at any time in the past five years. But with that good news comes a challenge: sellers have to make sure that a property stands out from the crowd to secure the right buyer at the optimum price. Even in a strengthening environment, there are country houses that sell speedily and others that linger on the market.

So what is the difference between the hares and the tortoises of rural property? According to Edward Lucas of Strutt & Parker’s Country House Department, it’s all about preparation.

‘Properties that are properly prepared by owners will outstrip the rest,’ he explains. ‘They will attract the highest volume of interest.’

The secret is to play to a property’s strengths and to get the fundamentals right. A seller should start by making sure the house is in good condition. ‘If necessary, instruct a surveyor to assess the property and recommend solutions to any problems identified,’ says Simon Abbott, a rural spokesman for the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. ‘Better you know in advance than a buyer discover an issue during the purchase process.’

Paying attention to the details is important as it will help to attract the maximum number of viewings. That means repairing and cleaning the most prestigious architectural elements of the

property – moulded cornices and sash windows for Georgian houses, for example, or window arches and brick fireplaces in Arts and Craft homes. These will feature in the estate agent’s details about the property and will serve as a mark of its history and authenticity, which are key attractions for buyers.

A BIGGER VIEW

Some owners of the ‘hares’ in country house sales take this even further and update the look and feel of their home specifically for viewings. This can involve hiring a ‘house doctor’ to advise on de-cluttering a property or, conversely, on how to dress a long-empty barn or cottage in the grounds to give buyers a glimpse of its potential.

‘Country houses typically have large doors and plenty of brass, so make sure they are repainted and polished,’ says Helen Silver, a Somerset house doctor. ‘Spruce up the boot room and add hooks to take the coats and dog leads from the front hall. Agents take far more photographs of country homes than urban ones, so ensure that everything looks its best.’

These are practical steps that all sellers can take to move their homes into the fast lane of the property market. But there are still some houses that are slow to attract interest, sometimes because they are affected by external issues, such as nearby roads or proposed development.



BEST IN CLASS

Luke Morgan, of Strutt & Parker’s Country Department, on what gets a country house noticed

ARCHITECTURAL PURITY:

Properties that exemplify an era, ideally linked to a recognised architect, always attract interest.

EASY ACCESS: Buyers don’t want to spend all their spare time driving, so houses in close proximity to schools, shops and train stations are particularly sought after.

THE RIGHT SETTING: Properties situated in stunning locations will capture the attention of potential buyers. This could be on the edge of a very pretty village or in the middle of the countryside with wonderful views.

The solution is often very simple: price. ‘Allow the property to sell itself,’ explains Lucas. ‘Pitching the property at a realistic level ensures that all the positive aspects of the house stand out rather than the compromises.’

RULES OF ATTRACTION

Evidence suggests that some purchasers may not find these issues a deterrent. For example, nearby roads often mean good transport links, which particularly appeal to buyers who need to commute, while a rural area popular with visitors typically has better local facilities. But buyers must be attracted to a house first. Price it too high and they’ll go elsewhere.

The one thing that experts caution against is over compensating by taking drastic measures to improve the property, such as large-scale modernisation. Buyers of country houses are likely to want to put their own stamp on their home. They are after a property that is in good order, rather than a design statement.

According to an old estate agent’s saying, ‘It only takes one person to buy a property’ – meaning that every home can sell, which is particularly true now that buyer numbers are increasing. But if you adopt the right tactics, you might invoke another old saying – the one about the tortoise and the hare. And we all know who won that race... ●

FIELDS OF GOLD

The land surrounding a country house offers opportunities for owners, as *Olivia Cooper* explains

Whether you have a few acres of parkland or hundreds of acres of farmland, managing the green space around a country house has to be carefully thought out. Do you want to generate an income, protect the environment or enjoy sporting rights? Everyone wants something different from their land and finding the right balance is a very personal decision.

The options depend on the extent and nature of the available land. Large swathes of arable land require different management to moorland, pony paddocks or woods. Even within each category there are a number of different choices.

FARMLAND

Land prices have rocketed by 300% since 2006, and ongoing concerns about food security in a world with a rapidly growing population mean land is likely to remain a good investment. 'Farming has become more profitable in recent years, and there are tax advantages to owning farmland,' says Mark McAndrew, Head of Estates and Farm Agency at Strutt & Parker.

However, not everyone wants to farm their land in-hand, instead opting to let it out. But that can have worrying tax

implications. 'Farmland and buildings can attract 100% exemption from Inheritance Tax,' says McAndrew. 'But letting land on Farm Business Tenancies can delay eligibility, so it may be preferable to enter into a contract farming agreement with a local farmer, whereby they provide the machinery and labour, and you share the input costs, returns and risks.'

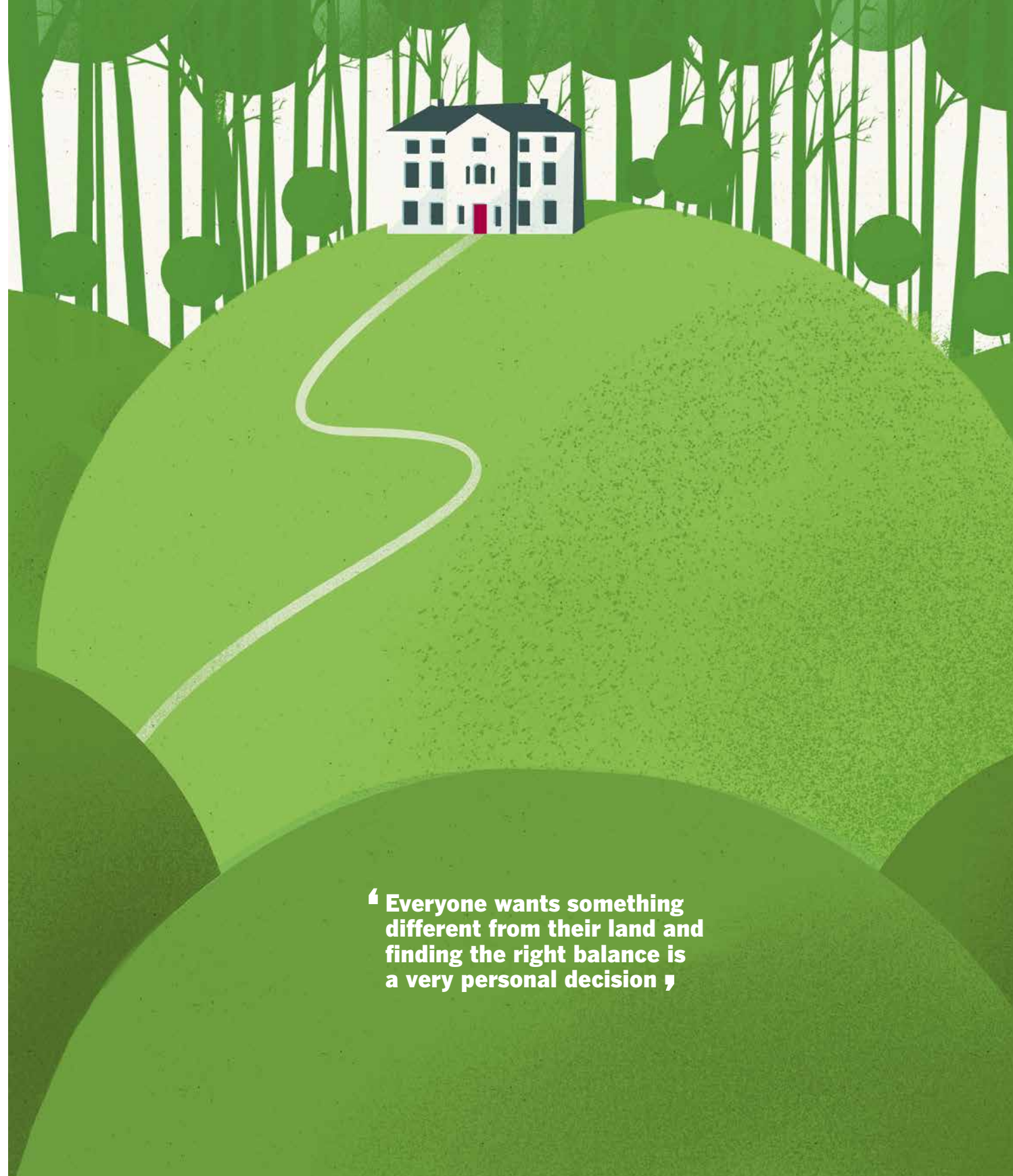
There are many other business models, including share farming, joint ventures and grazing agreements. 'It is important to understand the implications of each before making a commitment,' says Matthew Sudlow of Strutt & Parker's Estates and Farm Agency.

Often, landowners are keen to keep a proportion of grassland for personal interests, such as pony paddocks. This will require routine management that can either be carried out in-house, by a contractor, or by part- or full-time staff.

WOODLAND

Poor returns resulted in a lot of woodland being under-managed in the past. But revived interest in biomass fuels and new grant schemes mean woodland is once again a viable enterprise. Whether you have a large commercial wood or a few ►

‘Everyone wants something different from their land and finding the right balance is a very personal decision’



smaller copses, improving its management can generate an income, reduce domestic energy costs, enhance biodiversity and provide sporting and amenity enjoyment.

‘It is worth bearing in mind that trees may be protected by Tree Preservation Orders or Conservation Area designations,’ says Christopher Price, Policy Director at the Country Land and Business Association. ‘Landowners also have a legal responsibility to ensure their trees do not pose a public risk, so understanding the licensing requirements and other regulations is essential.’

The type of woodland management will depend on whether you want to

maximise sporting potential or biomass production – although the two are not mutually exclusive. But the proliferation of woodland diseases means landowners should be aware of which tree species they have and manage them accordingly. Grants may be available for improving woodland, although grant schemes for planting new woodland have now closed.

Of course, wood can also be sold. Firewood prices have increased by 50% over the past five years and, in some cases, woodland contractors are prepared to work in return for keeping the fuel.

SPORTING RIGHTS

Many landowners enjoy shooting, hunting or fishing across their land, and in some cases can generate an income by allowing other people to do the same. ‘But if you allow field sports on your land, knowledge of all aspects of the law is crucial,’ explains Price. Having appropriate insurance is also essential.

Planting trees or game cover for shooting should be very carefully considered, with the help of a gamekeeper or experienced shoot manager. ‘When it comes to any kind of change of land use, it’s a good idea not to rush anything,’ says McAndrew. ‘Take your time to settle in and walk the land to get to know it well before you make any changes – it’s always better to get it right first time.’

Landowners who wish to let shooting or fishing days to maximise their return should be aware that VAT may be payable. However, if they simply invite their friends

and family along, or form a syndicate with the intention of sharing costs rather than running a business, then they should be able to avoid VAT charges.

ALTERNATIVE USES

When considering alternative uses of land, owners must decide whether they want to have an active business, an activity to raise the profile of the estate, or a passive, low-risk investment. Options range from off-road driving experiences to wedding venues, open gardens, film locations and music festivals. The choice depends on the location of the property, as well as the experience and ambition of the landowner.

When it comes to residential, recent changes to planning legislation mean it is possible to convert redundant farm buildings to residential use without always requiring full planning permission. This can be an excellent way to increase capital value and generate regular letting income.

‘Holiday cottages can also provide a useful income,’ says Edward Lucas of Strutt & Parker’s Country House Department. ‘But to secure Business Property Relief from Inheritance Tax, owners must ensure they are actively running the business.’

Finally, campsites with less than five plots do not require planning permission. An alternative would be to lease land to a camping business, which will run the bookings and changeover days.

However, when opening up any land to the public, it is important to consider the impact this will have on your overall enjoyment of the property. ●

PRIVATE LIVES

Public access can be an issue for landowners

Many country house owners are concerned about privacy, so it is essential to identify all of the public rights of way affecting the land before agreeing to any purchase. In some cases, rights of way can be moved, but it is a potentially costly process. Screening with hedgerows may be more practical.

‘Land that is affected by open access, or that is

crossed by rights of way, should be carefully managed to minimise risks to users,’ says Charlotte Kershaw of Strutt & Parker’s Lewes office. ‘Landowners should also ensure they have public liability insurance.’

Where access has been historically permitted, it could be sensible to erect signs explaining that it is private land. This will help to prevent anyone applying to register the land as a village green or public right of way.

GOING GREEN

Use alternative energy to generate valuable income

One of the best ways of generating a low-risk income from land is to invest in renewable energy.

‘You can get around a 10% return on your initial investment by installing solar panels or wind turbines, assuming that you have a suitable site,’ explains Alexander Creed, Head of Resources & Energy at Strutt & Parker.

To be effective, solar sites should be southward facing and not shaded by large trees or buildings. Landowners with potential wind turbine locations should have the wind speed measured to assess their suitability.

Planning permission is also likely to be required

When it comes to financing, landowners can either invest in the technology directly, or they can team up with a renewable energy firm to reduce the capital costs.



THE LEARNING CURVE

Top-performing schools are having a significant impact on the country house market. Mark Palmer reports

Competition is fierce at the country’s highest performing schools – and that’s just to gain a confirmed place, never mind passing exams and then moving on to a good university.

But competition isn’t confined to the classroom. Parents are also vying to find a suitable country home in the catchment area of a good state school or within easy reach of a top independent school.

As a result, the premiums paid by owners to be near the best schools have increased hugely. Strutt & Parker puts the ‘good school premium’ at anything from 30% to 50% in some hotspots.

‘Although the commute to work is still the biggest factor when people are thinking of buying a house in the country, the next is close proximity to a popular school,’ says Edward Brassey of Strutt & Parker’s Market Harborough office.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

The increase in the good school premium is partly down to a change in attitude to education. The previous generation of parents considered it entirely normal to send their children at a young age to a boarding school without much expectation of seeing them again until half term.

Now parents expect to be much more involved. Boarding is on the decline, especially at prep school level, and even if a child is a boarder, parents will have far more access to the school than they once did. There are matches to watch and plays to attend, while exeats

are far more frequent than in the past. All of which makes living near to the school a necessity for an orderly family life.

No wonder the mantra of ‘education, education, education’ – first coined by Tony Blair in the run-up to the 1997 general election – is now inextricably linked to ‘location, location, location’.

‘The most sought-after properties are usually within 30 minutes of the school gates, and certainly no more than 45 minutes,’ explains Brassey. ‘The closer the house is to the school, the bigger the benefits, in terms of savings on petrol and shorter journeys with restless children.’

But there is also a much larger financial consideration for parents – the ability to register their children as day pupils rather than boarders. Janette Wallis, Senior Editor at the Good Schools Guide, reveals you can pay from £7,000 to over £10,000 a term for a boarder. Fees for a day pupil are considerably less expensive, starting at around £5,000 – which is why owning a home close enough to do a daily school run has become the preferred choice for many families.

Of course, your children have to get into the school in the first place, which has become more challenging. At one time, only Eton College pre-tested pupils in advance of Common Entrance; today almost all senior schools do.

‘Pre-tests mean that you have to be organised, but it means you have more time to decide where to live,’



says Lisa Freeman, Managing Director of At The School Gates, an advisory service that specialises in helping children find suitable schools. ‘My advice is to register as soon as you can and get sorted for the pre-test. The days of finding a place a year in advance for a good public school are long over.’

SMART MOVES

Planning your child’s education gives you a much clearer indication of when to look for a rural property and, ultimately, when to move. Parents often keep an eye on a local property market from the moment their child is born if they have decided which school they want him or her to attend. So perhaps it’s not surprising that good estate agents in rural areas now need to be experts in schooling as well as housing.

‘I regard it as part of my job to give advice to prospective buyers about schools in the area,’ says Brassey. ‘I also tell them to try out the school run so they don’t end up spending too many hours a day in a car. Life’s too short for that.’ ●

SIX OF THE BEST

Outstanding country schools, chosen by *Lisa Freedman from At The School Gates*

AMPLEFORTH COLLEGE, YORKSHIRE

Still the biggest and best Catholic school in the country. Forward-looking but with a profound history, superb grounds and a unique atmosphere.

CHELTENHAM LADIES’ COLLEGE, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

This high-octane school is girls only, with around 630 boarders and 230 day pupils. You need to be bright to gain a place. The terrific new arts centre has a 330-seat auditorium.

ETON COLLEGE, BERKSHIRE

More prime ministers have been educated here (including the present one) than any other school in the country. Top of the league in every sense – but girls are unlikely to be admitted this century.

GLENALMOND, PERTHSHIRE

Some 300 acres of Perthshire countryside awaits. An almost equal mix of boys and girls attend, with 100% going on to further education.

OUNDLE, PETERBOROUGH

This co-ed, fully boarding school is close enough to London but with a good rural atmosphere. Bright children only need apply.

RUGBY, WARWICKSHIRE

You’ve read the stories about how the game of rugby started here – now see the school for yourself. Pupils work hard and play hard, and the boarding houses are central to the community spirit.

attheschoolgates.co.uk

ON THE MONEY

Lawrie Holmes reveals four smart ways to cut the cost of running a country house

1 BE A FARMER
If a house has agricultural land, you can apply for Business Property Relief or Agricultural Property Relief. Both provide Inheritance Tax relief on up to 100% of the value of the asset. How much you gain depends on the role the house plays in the farm business. ‘The strongest case is where a farmhouse and the occupier are integral to a large area of working land, while the weakest position is if you have a large country house with a small estate,’ says James Gladstone of Cazenove Capital Management. ‘A lot depends on whether the farmhouse is “character appropriate”. This can be quite subjective and success (or not) will depend on the case put forward to HMRC, which will scrutinise this area very carefully.’

2 WELCOME THE PUBLIC
There is the opportunity to exempt your home from Inheritance Tax if you can prove your house is of historical interest and you are willing for the public to

visit. You will need to demonstrate the building is a genuine heritage asset, which will be decided by HMRC in conjunction with the government’s heritage advisory agencies, such as English Heritage.

3 GO GREEN
Alternative energy technologies benefit from incentives such as the Feed-in Tariff (FITs) for solar PV and the newly launched Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) for biomass, heat pumps and solar thermal. These schemes provide ongoing, index-linked payments for the heat or power generated. ‘The FIT applies to any form of alternative power, such as solar panels or wind turbines, allowing you to displace your electricity consumption and gain an income,’ says Tom Beeley, Renewable Energy Adviser at the Country Land and Business Association. ‘But perhaps more exciting is the Domestic RHI as it allows you to replace heating systems – which in country houses are often old and

inefficient, and use expensive heating oil – with more efficient renewable heating systems, such as biomass boilers or heat pumps.’ Biomass boilers have been particularly popular under the scheme: not only do they reduce heating fuel costs, but the Domestic RHI also pays up to 8.6p on every kilowatt hour of heat used.

4 HAVE A MAKEOVER
Grants are available for the repair of historic buildings. These are mainly offered for urgent repairs to prevent loss or damage to important features. One of the most significant sources is English Heritage, which prioritises grants for buildings where elements of the historic environment are at risk (i.e. if it is on its Buildings at Risk Register). In order to qualify for a grant, English Heritage needs to be satisfied that the building is not eligible for any other source of public or charitable funding, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund. All applications are handled by English Heritage’s local offices. ●



KEY CONTACTS

ESTATE AGENCY

Michael Fiddes 020 7318 5192
michael.fiddes@struttandparker.com

ESTATES & FARMS AGENCY

Mark McAndrew 020 7318 5171
mark.mcandrew@struttandparker.com

LAND MANAGEMENT

James Farrell 01423 706770
james.farrell@struttandparker.com

FARMING

Will Gemmill 01223 459471
will.gemmill@struttandparker.com

COMMERCIAL

Damian Cronk 020 7318 5065
damian.cronk@struttandparker.com

LONDON RESIDENTIAL

Andrew Scott 020 7318 4639
andrew.scott@struttandparker.com

RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

Simon Kibblewhite 020 7318 5177
simon.kibblewhite@struttandparker.com

TAXATION

Jonathan Smith 01273 407038
jonathan.smith@struttandparker.com

ACCOUNTING

Shaun Spalding 01245 254661
shaun.spalding@struttandparker.com

PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

James Youatt 01243 832602
james.youatt@struttandparker.com

VALUATIONS

Stephen Wolfe 020 7318 5081
stephen.wolfe@struttandparker.com

BUILDING SURVEYING

Jane Henshaw 01273 407024
jane.henshaw@struttandparker.com

PROPERTY WEALTH MANAGEMENT

Andrew Yeandle 020 7318 5016
andrew.yeandle@struttandparker.com

SCOTTISH SPORTING

Michael Laing 01738 783353
michael.laing@struttandparker.com

RESOURCES & ENERGY

Alexander Creed 020 7318 5022
alexander.creed@struttandparker.com



struttandparker.com/countryhouses