

SAMUEL JOHNSON would despair, but some of us have tired of London. Within a week of lockdown, it was apparent that our main reasons for being in the capital—a short commute, an outstanding local primary school and flat whites on every corner—were redundant.

With three children and two dogs, the Victorian townhouse we had renovated as a newly married couple was no longer working for us. Our woolly ideas about moving to the country began to take shape. With my husband, who works in Fintech (financial technology), unlikely ever to go back to five days a week in the office, we felt liberated to look beyond the 'golden hour' of commuter-land.

We wanted to travel past the manicured lawns and verges into wilder countryside—as described by Nancy Mitford in *The Pursuit of Love*, where 'the roosting pheasant and the waking owl filled every night with wild primeval noise'.

‘It’s easy to imagine the transformative effect newcomers could have on rural communities’

Suddenly, great swathes of the countryside have been opened up to us: Dorset and Somerset in the west and, heading north, the Norfolk coast and as far north as Rutland, even York. We wouldn't be what one country friend calls, disparagingly, the 'DFLs'—the Down From Londons—second-home owners using the village as a dormitory and contributing little. I'd walk our children down the lane to school, go to Pilates in the village hall, help with the flowers in church.

'I have always said that broadband would be the renaissance of rural communities,' says Sarah Lee, head of policy at the Countryside Alliance (CA), 'as it will enable more home working and, therefore, people supporting their local shops and services. In my mind, this was eight to 10 years away. It's amazing what the pandemic has done.'

Property finder Greta Hillier, who covers Somerset, Devon and south-west Wiltshire (www.rusticmoves.com), has witnessed such a surge in people wanting 'a complete lifestyle change' since the easing of lockdown that, when we spoke, she had temporarily closed her list to new clients. ➤

No more DFLs: people relocating to picturesque villages such as Tideswell, Derbyshire, want to be a part of local life



The re-birth of the English country village

Thanks to broadband, rural areas are set to be transformed by an influx of newcomers freed from the shackles of a daily commute, finds Flora Watkins

Somerset is particularly popular, with buyers—including the former Chancellor, George Osborne—lured by the vibrant market towns of Bruton and Frome and the fast (90-minute) train journey from Castle Cary to Paddington. Mr Osborne recently bought Prospect House in Bruton, through local agents Lodestone.

'Some people might be commuting a couple of days a week,' says Mrs Hillier of her new type of client. 'Others are working completely from home and only going to London occasionally.' They might stay in town a few nights a month, but the main home is in the country—and they want to be active in their new communities.

'One woman I acquired a house for now works in the community shop and is on the parish council,' Mrs Hillier divulges. Another client who left London recently, Leander Ward, has become similarly immersed in village life since moving into The Old Rectory in North Barrow, near Castle Cary.

'I have been asked to be on the parish council, although I think I'm still a bit green!' he laughs. 'What unites me with the people in the village is our concerns, such as inappropriate planning issues—that's quite bonding.'

The Wards, with two young children and another on the way, are exactly the sort of energetic family that can provide a tonic for sleepy villages. They have renovated The Old Rectory to offer a high-quality holiday let in one wing (the whole house is available in the holidays: www.oldrectorynorthbarrow.com). Mr Ward, whose background is in wildlife filmmaking, grew up 'on a beach in north Devon', but settled on Somerset because 'the sweet spot was having access not only to London, but Bristol, which has a good natural-history unit and post-production facilities I've tapped into'.

This exodus of 30- and 40-somethings continues into Dorset and the 'Sherborne triangle', then on into Devon, where fast trains from Exeter take a little over two hours to Paddington. 'I do think we will see a change in demographics for the South-West,' enthuses Sarah-Jane Bingham-Chick, Savills' Exeter director. 'It will help the area and be brilliant for the economy. At present, it is total relocation, not second homes and not only around Exeter—the South Hams are seeing the biggest influx.' The combination of Covid-19 and broadband—'superb

in most areas'—has made it possible to live in places that were hitherto holiday destinations, as well as keeping the London job.

Mrs Bingham-Chick herself relocated to the South Hams nearly 20 years ago, after coming for a long weekend with her baby daughter. 'I thought "this is the childhood I want her to have",' she recalls. 'There is Dartmoor on the doorstep, brilliant beaches, five estuaries and the schools are superb.' Children attending the coveted grammar schools in east Devon have one of the most idyllic school runs in the country, taking the ferry across the river from Dartmouth, then boarding the bus.

Yet Mrs Bingham-Chick laughs heartily at the notion of Devon as remote. Another excellent rail link to the capital, she explains, is Tiverton Parkway. 'You drive straight off the M5 into the car park and the train takes two hours: Tiverton, Taunton, Reading and Paddington. It's brilliant.'

It's the three or four days a week that people aren't making the journey that will make all the difference to villages. 'It's the extra spend during the day,' explains Miss Lee. 'We all need a change in environment when working

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from home, whether it's walking down to the village shop to buy a flat white or supper for tonight, or having a pint and ending up spending £10.'

When one considers that a daily commute within the 'golden hour' eats up about 15 hours per week, with annual season tickets costing several thousand pounds, it isn't hard to imagine the transformative effect newcomers could have on rural areas. In the pretty flint villages along the north Norfolk coast, where up to 40% of the houses are second homes, this may have come too late for places such as Cley-next-the-Sea, which lost its primary school a few years ago due to dwindling numbers of local children. Yet could the seismic lifestyle change we are witnessing reverse that process?

'London buyers are coming out in droves,' confirms Mrs Bingham-Chick, as her colleague at Savills in Stamford, James Abbott, confirms registered house hunters leaving London postcodes increased by 41% from May to June. His office has never sold more housing stock than in June this year. 'Since lockdown, families have been extending searches beyond the villages between Peterborough and Stamford into

Making connections

If you are considering a move to the country, high-speed broadband and mobile connectivity are 'up there with schools and local services' stresses the CA's Sarah Lee—'because you can't work without them'. Most broadband providers have their own postcode-checker and the regulator, Ofcom, has one on its website, but these are no substitute for local knowledge, as they're based on computer modelling and may not reflect reality. 'Talk to shopkeepers, go to the pub and find out which company people are using,' advises Miss Lee.

Don't rule out the small internet providers; they offer some of the best coverage and highest speeds. B4RN (Broadband for the Rural North) is a community-led project based in Lancashire that works with local farmers. Its people put in much of the cabling, keeping costs down to £30 a month for most users for the standard 1Gbps service. (For comparison, our fibre broadband in London is a 10th of this at 108Mbps.)

Broadband doesn't have to be delivered by fixed lines; there are some good networks run off 4G. Be aware that indoor and outdoor coverage may differ wildly—it's harder for a mobile-phone signal to penetrate a thick stone-walled farmhouse.

Before Covid-19, the Prime Minister pledged fixed fibre for the whole of the UK by 2025. The advent of 5G will further increase connectivity for rural areas—but not until 2030. Until then, buyers must do their homework to secure their rural dream.

Rutland,' he notes. 'They're assuming they won't be back in the office for the rest of the year.' The commute from Peterborough or Kettering, he attests, is 'easier than from the commuter hotspot of the Cotswolds' and village houses are built 'from exactly the same honey-coloured stone from the same seam', yet prices are considerably cheaper.

'This area has retained its timelessness,' muses Mr Ward on his part of Somerset, the Vale of Camelot. 'When you come out this much farther west, the landscape and the pace taps into what I was hoping for... that kind of old-world feel. There is a sense of magic.'

In the post-pandemic era, when one thinks of what was once an acceptable daily commute (catching the 07.03 five days a week), I can't help but think of Dr Johnson's words on a dog walking on its hind legs. It is 'not done well—but you are surprised to find it done at all.'



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