

'Forget the countryside – we moved to a London village'

Couples who would ordinarily retreat to the provinces are choosing a life in the capital

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'We live and eat just as well as we would in the country,' says Sophie Rogerson – pictured in Wandsworth Common with her husband and dogs. Credit: Clara Molliner



Anna Tyzack
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George Nares's country friends pity him for being trapped in town, but secretly he's smug that he stayed put. He grew up in Somerset and his wife is from North Yorkshire, but they don't feel deprived of nature and fresh air by raising their family in central London.

Muddy walks, riding, wild swimming and village cricket can all be enjoyed in the capital if you know where to look, he says, along with farmers' markets, village shops and county shows.

Meanwhile, Nares, who is co-founder of estate agency Blue Book, can be at his oEce in just 15 minutes.

"If your heart is in the country but your desk is in the capital, moving to suburbia can be the worst of all worlds," he says. "You're not in proper countryside and you don't get to enjoy the buzz of London.

"It's better to move to a good London village instead."

| Properties over £1m by region | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| Region | Number of £1m properties | Share of properties ove |
| London | 330,668 | 8.70% |
| South East | 155,085 | 3.80% |
| East of England | 62,812 | 2.20% |
| South West | 45,735 | 1.70% |
| West Midlands | 19,918 | 0.80% |
| North West | 18,848 | 0.60% |
| Yorkshire and The Humber | 10,978 | 0.40% |
| Scotland | 10,931 | 0.40% |
| East Midlands | 8,397 | 0.40% |
| Wales | 4,239 | 0.30% |

The capital's vast green spaces and network of villages set it apart from every other European capital. Foreigners have always appreciated London's wild side, Nares says, but now the Wellington boot brigade – who'd ordinarily retreat to the provinces after a few years of city life – are seeking it out too.

Many now have to work from an office in London several days a week and can't stomach a life of commuting – others have been looking for a house in the country fruitlessly for a couple of years and have given up.

The number of homes bought by Londoners outside the capital fell to 69,190 in 2023, according to Hamptons estate agents, the lowest number since 2014.

"If the country fix you crave is walking your dog on a common before work, riding once a week or shopping at a traditional butcher or bookshop, you can find it in London," Nares says.

"A smarter move is often relocating within town – to somewhere with a village feel, near a park or the river, yet still just a short commute from your desk." An exclusive study by Knight Frank, which tracked the movement of buyers searching in both London and the countryside, puts Dulwich at the top of the muddy boroughs chart.

| The top 10 London destinations for buyers registered in the countryside | |
|---|-------|
| Dulwich | 12.6% |
| Fulham | 8.7% |
| Wandsworth | 8.5% |
| Kensington | 6.9% |
| Richmond | 5.8% |
| Notting Hill | 5.2% |
| Islington | 4.2% |
| Chiswick | 3.8% |

"It feels like the countryside," explains Camilla Heywood from Knight Frank, who lives in the area with her husband and toddler.

"There's a real sense of community and green space all around but it's Zone 2. You can be in Victoria in less than 15 minutes."

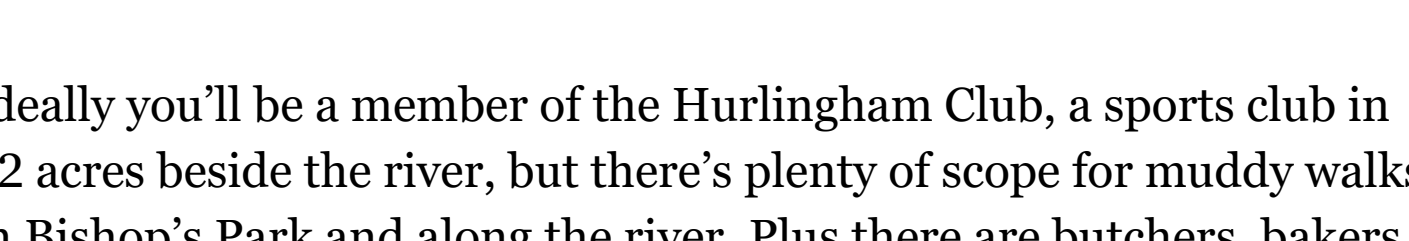
Many country-minded buyers regard Dulwich as a leafy stopgap before they escape to the provinces, but end up staying until their children leave school – or longer.

The most expensive houses are found in Dulwich Village and by the common in west Dulwich, while there are more affordable family houses in east Dulwich.

"For the larger houses, 19 years is the average span of ownership," Heywood says.

"There are so many great private schools and outstanding state schools that families find it very difficult to leave. Plus there's a riding school on Dulwich Common, a golf club, the Dulwich Picture Gallery and quintessential village shops.

"The market is so strong that we can't keep up with demand. In Dulwich Village a huge number of the properties we sell never even make it online."



Dulwich is so popular with buyers that homes are sold before they're advertised online. Credit: Julian Castle/Alamy

"Second on the list is Fulham, where country folk have always had pied-à-terres but now they're settling into family houses, too. It's not as villagey as Dulwich but Parsons Green, Walham Green and the Peterborough Estate are close-knit neighbourhoods.

Ideally you'll be a member of the Hurlingham Club, a sports club in 42 acres beside the river, but there's plenty of scope for muddy walks in Bishop's Park and along the river. Plus there are butchers, bakers and grocers as good as those in the country.

Third is Wandsworth, where Bellevue Village has a high street facing the common with independent shops. Family houses in Nightingale Village, between Clapham and Wandsworth commons, are also popular. But some of the most expensive houses are found in a group of streets known as the Toast Rack, which have gates directly on to the common. There's also a country-style prep school, Broomwood.

"The most desirable houses in these areas have immediate access to green space, which you don't always get in the country," explains Sophie Rogerson of RFR Property. "We have buyers searching on a grid for four or five streets just to get that easy access to the common."

Narrowing price gap

The choice of London village can depend on which part of the provinces buyers come from, according to research by Savills. Wandsworth is popular with buyers from Wiltshire and the South West, for example, and Richmond, which includes Richmond Village and Barnes Village, attracts those from Surrey. Those from Buckinghamshire and Somerset choose Hammersmith and Fulham.

These rural buyers might once have chosen to live in the commutable countryside outside London, as the houses were cheaper and larger than in leafy villages in the capital. But the price gap has narrowed so much that London property is often better value.

For example, a four-bedroom house in Checkendon, south Oxfordshire, nine miles from Reading, is currently on the market for £1.7m, while in Dulwich Village, a grander and larger four-bedroom house is for sale for £1.65m.

The garden is admittedly smaller, yet the house is spitting distance from the common, the village shops and the station with quick links into central London.

"You have to go further into the countryside to achieve a substantial upsize these days," Nares explains. That said, the larger family houses in Dulwich or Richmond villages will be out of the question for most buyers – with prices starting at around £4m on the best streets.

'I keep my horse in Richmond Park'

Sophie Rogerson lives in Wandsworth with her husband and two children.

A few years ago, we packed up our dogs and our tiny baby and rented a manor house in a gorgeous village in Hampshire. We love being outdoors and I've always ridden – it seemed the obvious next step for us.



But with a small child and a young business based in London, the reality was we were on the M3 all the time and we weren't enjoying the country or the town.

When we moved back to London, I wanted the most rural lifestyle possible. I think Richmond would be best for us but it's just too far from my desk in Chelsea. We ended up going for a house in Wandsworth with the common at the end of the road, and Clapham Common and Battersea Park nearby.

We now have two children and it works really well. I walk our three dogs before work on one of the commons or by the river, I keep a horse in Richmond Park and our children are outside playing football all the time.

In the country, we had to drive when we went on a walk and we never met anyone. Here, we can do everything by walking from our front door and we're part of a connected and supportive community. And the tennis club, where I play twice a week, is so much less political.

We live and eat just as well as we would in the country. There are amazing farmers' markets all over London and I can choose between all the fresh produce delivery services. Plus Hauser & Wirth has a new farm shop in Mayfair.

One thing I would say is that you definitely pay more to live the country idyll in London: riding, tennis clubs, farmers' markets – none of it is cheap.

We often joke that we would spend much less if we headed back down the M3 but our life would be a lot less convenient.

But there are other lesser known villages, which offer access to a similar lifestyle and cheaper property, such as Nunhead and Peckham Rye, which are within reach of Dulwich Village, and Raynes Park near Wimbledon Village.

In north London, Walthamstow is increasingly popular with country-minded families. "We keep chickens, there's a nearby riding school, cricket, rugby and sailing clubs, and of course, Epping Forest, plus the wetlands," explains Amelie de Richemont, who lives there with her husband and children. While Nares's friends have been busy escaping to the country, he has retreated deeper into London.

One day his family will make it to the countryside, he says, but only when it's convenient. When this will be is hard to say, given that he can walk to a farmer's market, villagey shops and dog-friendly pubs in Eccleston Village, as well as to Hyde Park and Green Park.

"We've got buyers who are desperately looking for a place in the countryside but when they see a cottage by the river or a villa near a beautiful park in town they change their minds," he says.

"If you can tap into village life in London, you really do get the best of all worlds."