

## The Hollington Barn Story

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Liz was keenly showing me her video movie on the camera's tiny screen: "that's the stairs going up to the living space" — the picture swayed as the camera bobbed and swooped: "Look, the floor's made from concrete paving slabs and see how high the ceiling is". This *handicam verité* was quite compelling; I was almost hooked.

The Barn's details had landed in our Highgate hallway a few days ago and Liz had driven straight to the East Sussex Downs. "The village is at the end of a *two mile* dead-end road with the most amazing views, but if you drive on up the hill and over the top, there's this rubble track, to the sea just a mile away."

Like every other couple with children in London, we'd talked for years about one day moving out, but now we had a window. James was thirteen and Sophy eleven so both could change schools without too much trauma. We could sell our over-priced London house and trade sideways to a country place, even liberate a bit of much-needed cash. So the next weekend I drove south with James to see for myself. The trip was memorable not just because it rained so hard the M23 traffic slowed to stop; it was also my last drive prior to a fifteen-month ban (guilty and not proud, should you ask).

I loved the barn too. Its gardens, carved from the grounds of an ancient manor, were spectacular and the huge central pond was clearly a major asset.

Liz and I agreed it was a must-have, so I proudly called the snooty estate agency to offer the asking price. "Yes, but can you perform?" asked the agent. What did he mean?

"I have a valuable house in Highgate to sell." I declared.

"Then you can't perform."

"I'm not a circus dog. Please advise your client to accept our offer and take the barn off the market.

"Of course, when you can perform."

In those balmy days of the big City bonus, performance meant immediate access to a carrier bag full of used fifties. People who had to sell the house they were in before buying a new one were sad losers.

We did perform in the end and moved on a searing August day in 2000. Along with the barn there were two cottages. Liz was to run the bigger one as a holiday let business and the other would be for guests. The buildings had been converted and modernised in the seventies and the style had some retro period charm. We weren't in the mood or of the pocket for major works but we planned some minor re-fitting and decorating.

That late summer the gardens were gorgeous. The barn crouched in a bowl-shaped fold so there was a high terrace reached by several stepped stone paths or by a wooded walk, there were ruined classical knick knacks, an Elizabethan well-head and views over the manor and its grounds straight out of Narnia. And there was the pond.

Lewes was famously flooded that October when the Ouse broke its banks. The barn was hundreds of feet above river level but we had our own private flood. The pond — an ancient village pond — received all the surface water from the surrounding slopes. Two hundred years ago most of that water soaked straight into the Sussex chalk but with metalled roads, concrete farmyards and slate roofs, a lot of that water now flowed through the village, under our gate and into our pond. So when that unprecedented rain came hammering down non-stop for days on end, the lower part of our gardens just filled up. We now had a lakeside barn. Liz and I lay awake in bed at night listening to the rain; we went out with torches to check the water level, now about two meters deep! I thought of getting a boat.

Our village was really a remote hamlet. The tiny church next to our barn was stacked with pensioners from nearby towns on Sundays but not one of the thirty or so locals ever went in. No pub of course, a dour and careless farmer, a roller-towel entrepreneur in the vicarage and the manor, I feared, was some kind of Secret Service hideout. This was a spooky place with great potential as a screenplay but not as a place to live. Liz was in tears a lot of the time and the kids sank into sullen withdrawal.

Liz had to do all the family driving of course, being married to Mr no-licence. I worked in London and at first quite enjoyed the antique rail connection with its quaint little nineteen-sixties trains. But on the seventeenth of October 2000 a train in far-off Hatfield crashed and killed and the neglectful institution in charge of Britain's railways had no option but to suddenly try to repair the whole network all at once. Some days I could get to London, some not; sometimes there would be a train but it would take four hours to make the trip.

The rain-and-no-trains winter ground on until it got bored and started looking for a new cruel gimmick. Foot and Mouth was a masterstroke! Deprive the Hollingtons and their two dogs of the one thing that makes their country life bearable: the country! From February until June the East Sussex countryside was closed. We could walk down the roads but if we strayed onto the footpaths or the parkland grass, snipers in the government helicopters circling above would surely pick us off.

We managed to get out of the barn by October and moved to a brick house in Lewes. Liz now works for the snooty estate agency and can dismiss non-performers with the best of them. The trains are working *fairly* well but the rolling stock is two years older and so badly frayed I expect the doors to start falling off next week. I can drive again. It's been a dry year so far.

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