

Let's just say I've been on a lot of trains. This year, I travelled the country on your behalf to snoop around dozens of properties on the market. And, fabulous though the houses were, their owners were usually far more intriguing. After all, there's a limit to how often your interest can be sparked by precisely how Farrow & Ball shades are on the walls. (Is that Clunch or Savage Ground? I don't care any more, even if they are cunning cheap copies.) My resolution for 2015 is not to give an F&B about point.

Other resolutions are to get more gardening tips from the people I visit – I've got some lovely blue flowers in my beds, thanks to input from one gifted horticulturalist – and not to feel shitty and depressed by the perfect order of almost every house I see. They're on the market, and have been purged for the purpose.

I've met, *inter alia*, a songwriter, a hot-air balloonist, a lord of the manor, a pair of retired vicars, a couple of inspiring teachers, a fashion mogul, a bestselling novelist and a ghostbuster. All were in possession of a home they wanted to sell: upsize, downsizing, empty-nesting, retiring, releasing cash for the kids or simply bored with their perfect home.

About a third of those who subjected their homes to my scrutiny managed to shift them, and though a few got buyers to cough up a smidge more, there were no spectacular bidding wars. Indeed, the Old Vicarage, in the upmarket Essex village of Stebbing – a seven-bedroom house with a huge kitchen and outdoor pool – went on sale at £2.85m in March and sold last month for less than £2m. And for every house that sold, there's one still languishing with an estate agent's board, its owners unwilling to yield to market forces. Others have come down, been let out or withdrawn.



Beauties left on the shelf

KAREN ROBINSON

Our columnist saw dozens of houses (and shades of paint) in 2014. But how many of them actually sold?



Blue Jay, in Surrey, top, didn't sell for £12m, but Zero House, above, went for £1m. Also still unsold are Pentney Abbey, above right, a £2.625m home in Wandsworth, left, and a £295,000 Tyneside flat, below



The exclusive gated community where Blue Jay nestles certainly ticks the location box. Other places, though, fall just far enough on the wrong side of the tracks to make them hard to sell. The Newcastle businessman John Hawdon's trophy penthouse at Baltic Quay, in Gateshead, was one of the most expensive properties on Tyneside when he paid £581,000 for it 10 years ago. But it's found no takers at £695,000. Although the Tyneside views are spectacular, it's in what's still perceived as the unfashionable part of the city (0191 223 3500, sandersonyoung.co.uk).

The same goes for Pentney Abbey, near King's Lynn, Norfolk, which is a bit too far south and west to qualify as part of Kensington-on-Sea: the area around Blakey and Burnham Market, where second-homers from London have pushed up prices and made red cords practically national dress. It is possible, though, that taking on a unique bit of heritage that comes with the three-bedroom farmhouse – the monumental medieval gatehouse, heroically restored by the owners, Howard Barber and Dita Lee – is putting people off paying the £2.75m asking price (020 7861 1782, knightfrank.co.uk). Yet Zero House, in York, which outraged some locals for daring to be modern, was snapped up for £1m (five grand over the asking price).

As a general rule, the more interesting the house, the harder it is to sell. Quirkiness, historical features and the inconvenience of living with all that authentic charm, especially if it's listed, seem to reduce the number of people who want to own what you own. In the end, though, it only takes one buyer. Just don't talk to me about pain.

Additional reporting by Charlotte Wigram-Verans

■ If you would like Karen to cast her critical eye over a property you are selling in 2015, email bt@sunday-times.co.uk

KATRINA BURROUGHS

Opulent wallcoverings from the Italian leather specialists Studioart became available in the UK this year at Rubelli's London showroom. The firm provides leather to high-end fashion houses, as well as making wallcoverings in an array of colours and textures, including this spectacular metallic. £574 a sq metre, rubelli.com

LUXE

The SCP online sale began on Boxing Day; the in-store one runs from Tuesday to February 1, with 20% off SCP rugs and furniture. Ex-display items have been slashed by up to 50% – this Arthur low table by Donna Wilson (60cm diameter) was £350, but is now £227.50. www.scp.co.uk

LESS

LATEST

Look out for this lovely monochrome collection, due in at House of Fraser this spring. Mono Mark mixes geometric prints and handcrafted pieces, subtle contrasts and soft fabrics. Pictured are the Mono striped double duvet set (£70), quilted grey throw (£80) and chevron-print cushion (£25); accessories include wooden candlesticks (small £15, large £20). houseoffraser.co.uk

SOLUTIONS FOR PAGE 10

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE CROSSWORD

E	D	O	U	A	R	D	D	I	A	L	Y	S	I	S	D	O	V	E	R
U	U	Y	E	T	N	O	A	N	R	E	E								
S	A	T	I	N	E	H	A	V	I	O	U	R	O	H	C	A	R	I	O
E	D	O	U	A	R	D	D	I	A	L	Y	S	I	S	D	O	V	E	R
B	L	O	C	K	E	R	P	R	O	C	L	A	M	E	R	S			
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O	U	R	F	A	T	H	E	R	I	C	O	O	P	E	R				
G	I	M	E	A	T	P	E	L											
V	A	L	E	R	I	E	D	M	O	S	E	S	A	G	N	E	T	H	A
A	O	L	N	T	M	I	R	H	D										
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L	I	N	G	E	A	K	I	L											
A	L	L	I	C	E	I	N	W	O	N	D	E	R	L	A	N	D	L	O
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A	O	Y	T	T	I	T	D	A	P										
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D	I	A	M	O	N	D	A	T	O	M	I	C	A	G	E	N	A	T	A
G	U	N	A	I	U	L	Y	R	O	A	O								
E	Y	R	L	I	E														
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SHORTCODE

L	I	S	T
A	C	O	S
S	T	O	R
E	L	L	

SUKO

9	8	4
22	20	
3	2	6
11	16	
5	1	7

JUMBO SUKUDO

8	9	A	6	1	7	5	2	B	4	C	3
5	4	3	7	C	6	B	8	A	1	2	9
B	1	2	C	A	4	9	3	5	6	7	8
C	3	7	A	4	B	1	9	6	8	5	2
6	5	1	B	2	3	8	7	4	C	9	A
4	2	8	9	6	5	A	C	3	7	1	B
3	7	5	8	B	2	C	A	1	9	4	6
1	B	C	4	5	9	3	6	8	2	A	7
A	6	9	2	8	1	7	4	C	B	5	3
7	8	4	3	2	B	9	A	6	1	5	8
2	C	B	3	9	A	6	1	7	5	8	4
9	A	6	1	7	8	4	5	2	B	3	C

BOXWISE

MAN	TRA
FUL	INS
VER	AST
MIN	UTE

TRAIN TRACKS

KAKURO

2	4	3	2	5	1	7	5		
1	3	5	1	6	3	2	8	9	
1	3	6	8	9	1	3			
1	2	5	8	3	4	3	2	5	1
7	9	1			1	3			
5	9	8	6	7	8	6	4	1	2
9	8	2	1	8	9	7	8	2	7
8	6	1	6	3	2	4	2		
9	7	3	2	5	1	3	1		

KILLER gentle

3	2	1	8	5	6	9	7	4
9	6	8	4	7	2	5	3	1
5	4	7	1	9	3	8	6	2
6	8	3	2	4	1	7	5	9
2	9	4	7	3	5	6	1	8
7	1	5	6	8	9	4	2	3
1	7	9	3	6	4	2	8	5
8	5	2	9	1	7	3	6	4
4	3	6	5	2	8	1	9	7

KILLER tough

3	6	7	4	1	2	5	9	8
4	8	1	5	9	3	7	6	2
5	2	9	8	7	6	1	4	3
9	4	6	1	5	8	3	2	7
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7	1	2	9	3	4	8	5	6
6	5	3	7	2	1	9	8	4
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1	7	4	6	8	9	2	5	3
7	4	6	8	9	2	5	3	1

ST SUNDAY TIMES SPOTIFY

Listen to Ann Reid's favourite tracks, plus Spotify music picks from John Sichel and Amy Williams, at sundaytimes.co.uk/playlist or in the tablet edition

KENKEN

1	6	3	4	2	5
5	3	6	1	4	2
2	4	1			
4	1	5	2	6	3
6	5	2	3	1	4
3	2	4	6	5	1

SUGURU

2	1	4	1	5	3	4	2
5	3	5	3	2	1	5	1
4	1	2	1	5	2	2	3
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3	4	1	2	5	2	4	1
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2	4	1	5	2	3	4	3
1	5	1	3	4	1	5	2
3	4	2	5	2	3	4	1