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Londoners flee to the country as lockdown threat grows

The holiday cottages at William Cash's Elizabethan house would normally be empty now, but they are filling up with city people hoping to escape a lockdown

William Cash with his wife, Laura

CIRCE HAMILTON FOR THE TIMES

William Cash | Tuesday March 24 2020, 12.01am, The Times

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When John Betjeman visited Upton Cressett in the summer of 1938 to research the *Shell Guide to Shropshire* he described it as being a "remote and beautiful place" located across "the loneliest of valleys".

The hamlet where I live with my milliner wife, Laura, and our two children lies near Bridgnorth on the River Severn in Shropshire. So secluded is our house — open to the public for "teas and tours" — that

BETA
Today's Quizle

Q: Which current Gladiator is one of only two people to have competed at summer and winter Olympic Games in the same city (Gladiator alias please)?

Test your knowledge ›

when Hitler was drawing up plans to make Bridgnorth his Nazi HQ in 1940, Upton Cressett was probably circled, according to Andrew Roberts, as his generals' new "Eagle's Manor".

PG Wodehouse, brought up in Bridgnorth, used to cycle along our cow-parsley and buttercup-filled lanes and called it the "paradise of England". Less idyllically, the English Heritage listing for our Elizabethan compound includes a Deserted Medieval Village — code for hundreds being wiped out in the Black Death. So plagues have visited the house, if not us, before.

Like many in the heritage tourism sector we are facing a catastrophic closed season. We are lucky, however, in that we have some holiday let properties that are normally empty in March and April. Not this year.

The morning after Boris Johnson announced that the country was on a war footing, I turned to Laura and said: "We need to make our cottages and gatehouse available for more than just a week or two. When the government closes all schools down there will be families desperate for a country bolthole, fresh air, a garden and secret woods to roam. It will be like *A Month in the Country* — only let's advertise for 'three months in the country'."

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Laura looked at me slightly blankly at this reference, not to the Turgenev play, but the 1980 novel by JL Carr that was adapted into a film starring Kenneth Branagh, Natasha Richardson and Colin Firth. I was enthralled by the book when it came out because the plot follows the war-healing effect of a country idyll in the depths of Yorkshire when a wounded former soldier is employed to restore a medieval mural in a village church hidden under whitewash.

Upton Cressett Hall in Shropshire

The move to the country — Carr actually wrote the novel in 1978 in his caravan in an orchard in Powys, Wales — brings unexpected changes in values and life's priorities. We see how the transformative power of architecture and natural beauty — not to mention love — can help to rescue and cure broken bodies, minds, hearts and, indeed, identities.

Maybe, I thought, such a country tonic would appeal to some London or other city-bunkered families. So we posted some pictures of our holiday rentals on our house's Instagram, saying: "Our secluded location made us ignored for requisition in the war. But with three holiday lets we are happy to be a remote idyllic retreat from the madding crowd."

The government has now warned urbanites not to flee to second homes. Clearly, this may put some would-be Panglossians in a quandary. Within 24 hours of posting on Instagram, a London friend, whose wife had taken a plane to New Zealand because she is asthmatic, had signed up to our Coach House for him and his daughter. "I may never come," he said. "I'm not really sure where Shropshire is. But it's good to know we have it just in case things get really bad and London is on lockdown."

Our gatehouse — with a guestbook that has included Boris Johnson, Margaret Thatcher, Elizabeth Hurley and, in the Civil War, Prince Rupert — doubles as a writer's retreat in the off-season (ie now). We give the keys to an established writer struggling to finish a book or play, and give them a few weeks to get on with their project in creative isolation.

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Previous fellows include the playwright Ella Hickson, the biographer Dr Lara Fiegel and the artist Adam Dant. Last year we launched the new Philip Kerr Fellowship for a crime or thriller writer and, subject to availability, will welcome applications for this new award during the pandemic. Maybe it will inspire a new *Love in the Time of Covid-19*. After all, the Second World War produced such masterpieces as Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*.

The local economy is gearing up. An email from Tanners, our local wine merchant, has made it clear that home deliveries are being stepped up. "We have wine to supply as required, but to help with the virus we have introduced guidelines to protect drivers and customers." These include not requiring a signature, stepping back two metres on delivery and placing cases of wine on the doorstep. Our top local catering service, Fresh & Lush, is increasing menu options and home deliveries, including to holiday-let clients.

Molly Dent-Brocklehurst and her partner, Richard Hudson

ALAN DAVIDSON/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

When the Queen said that “our nation’s history has been forged by people and communities coming together to work as one”, she evoked the Blitz spirit that involved hundreds of thousands of families and children fleeing London and other cities to escape Nazi bombing. Maybe local producers of our famous Shropshire blue cheese and Wroxeter wine growers might be about to have a Lovely War.

It’s the same across Britain. The author Mary Killen told me that she is well stocked up in Wiltshire and is looking forward to a productive war against Covid-19. “I live in a pocket of Wiltshire where the socialising is continuing, but in the past few days now takes the form of walking at a two-metre distance from each other,” she says. “I am thrilled to be confined to barracks in Wiltshire as I have suitcases worth of memorabilia, letters and pending admin to tackle.”

During the war, country houses were turned into hospitals, schools and training camps redolent of the prologue of *Brideshead Revisited*, which was written by Evelyn Waugh over six months in 1943-1944, mostly in a secluded country hotel in Devon. One example of a requisitioned house was Wolverton Hall in Worcestershire, a fine 18th-century mansion where “peers and poachers served together” as part of training Churchill’s “secret army” for the war effort.

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Eighty years on, Britain’s heritage sector is facing a very different sort of war against the invisible enemy of Covid-19. Houses that “served” in 1939-1945 are now facing very different challenges. Wolverton, for example, is owned by the Victoria & Albert chairman and author Nicholas Coleridge and his wife, Georgia. A newly built, elegant, neo-gothic garden folly that was designed by Quinlan Terry to be a writing pavilion is being commandeered as the house’s self-isolation quarantine sick bay for family members.

Instead of the house being overrun by about 45 soldiers being trained to kill with their bare hands, Wolverton today resembles an internet café hostel. “All four of our children are here working, having been sent home from work. Desks and computers in every room. It’s like a We Work organisation,” Coleridge says.

Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire has always done its bit in wartime. In the civil war it was the temporary home for Charles I. In the Second World War it was used as a refuge for the Tate Gallery with some of its collection being secretly stored, along with the director Sir John Rothenstein and his family staying on the estate.

The house is still active in the art world, with its co-owner the art dealer Molly Dent-Brocklehurst — and her sculptor boyfriend, Richard Hudson — having fielded a number of calls from London art world friends wanting to know if they have any spare cottages.

Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire
GETTY IMAGES

Molly’s mother, Lady Ashcombe, told me that she might follow the example of civic-minded owners of houses in the war by letting one of the three self-contained private castle apartments as a way of trying to compensate for the likely closure of the castle and grounds. “I am self-isolating at Sudeley and not going to London,” Lady Ashcombe says.

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Leading country house and cottage rental agencies have confirmed a “surge” in UK business. Britain’s heritage tourism sector — worth over £26 billion to the economy — is in lockdown, with the National Trust and English Heritage both closing all their ticketed properties.

Yet while the National Trust has over five million members and huge cash reserves, those in the privately owned historic houses sector are perhaps the most worried; not least as so many “punters” (as we call our tea and tour guests) are over 70 and should be self-isolating instead of listening to me telling anecdotes about how Margaret Thatcher got through a decanter of whisky or the uncertainty over which bedroom Boris Johnson actually slept in in 1995 when he was a political columnist.

As a result of mass cancellations, some enterprising historic-house owners have seen the fleeing of Londoners as an opportunity, as well as doing their bit for the new Covid-19 war effort. An example is Sir Ben Slade who has written to the health secretary, Matt Hancock, to offer Woodlands Castle in Ruishton, Somerset, set in 12 acres with "good parking", to become a national test centre for Covid-19.

"Woodlands Castle has had all of its bookings cancelled and is therefore empty," he wrote. "I would like to offer it to the authorities as an HQ for where they could do testing for the Covid-19 virus or for emergency coordination teams. We have a very good pavilion of approx 4,000 sq ft, which would be good for training, and the place could be run by doctors who have been tested and are virus-free. Alternatively, it could be sanitised by doctors, sealed and could become an emergency hospital."

Sir Ben has also written to the secretary of his St James's club in the hope that London-based members might take up his invitation to relocate their clubland lifestyle to another of his properties, Maunsel House in Somerset.

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"Everyone I know is getting out of London," Sir Ben wrote. "I am hoping to find some similar, like-minded people who can come and stay for a minimal amount. I'm looking for people who enjoy bridge, ballroom dancing, walking around the gardens and lakes, and enjoy fine wine and good food."

However, the worst-hit is English Heritage because few realise that since 2015 it has been a charity and relies on membership, admissions and private gifts to survive. Having to close all its sites has resulted in an "existential crisis'" for the custodian of Britain's finest heritage: the buildings that tell the story of England. Under the chairmanship of Sir Tim Laurence, approaches will be made to "a small group of visionary benefactors who could make an indelible mark on the future of England's past".

The working code name of this philanthropy group is the "Circle of Albion", and Sir Tim is seeking the generosity of about ten patrons who might commit to donate up to £3 million to £5 million each. "It is imperative that the government recognises the challenge we face," says Luke Purser, the head of development. "A grant of £100 million would secure the future of English Heritage. This has been put before the heritage minister, but now it is a national heritage emergency."

Not unlike the way French philanthropists stepped in to help Notre-Dame in its hour of need, some heroes need to come forward to ensure that the custodian of our history can survive — and that our built heritage remains the envy of the world.

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