

Nigel Havers on what makes a perfect house

In these tough economic times it's a place that adds value to your life, he says.

By Anna Tyzack

Published: 3:54PM BST 15 May 2009

Imagine your perfect home. If you're British, according to research, it will probably look something like Leckhampstead House in a pretty village on the Berkshire Downs, with its own front door, and a pitched roof with a chimney. This ready-made dream house belongs to the actor Nigel Havers' mother and stepfather: "I drive down avenues in Beverly Hills and every other property is a mock Queen Anne house," says Nigel Havers. "This is the real thing."

Havers, who starred in *Chariots of Fire* and *Empire of the Sun*, is the quintessential English actor, with aquiline features and aristocratic roots.

He was brought up in London and

Suffolk, and has always loved the British countryside. Leckhampstead House, an oasis of calm amid green fields 60 miles from his home in London, is his favourite Sunday lunch venue. He visits often with his wife Georgiana.



Nigel Havers and Leckhampstead House in Berkshire, for sale for £2.5m Photo: JULIAN ANDREWS

Related Articles

Nigel Havers: why I'm content to play the cad (</culture/tvandradio/5463076/Nigel-Havers-Why-Im-content-to-play-the-cad.html>)

The house is not especially grand or large. Its hub is a homely kitchen with gallery landing above, yet there are elegant reception rooms and attractive garden on all sides. "Houses like this don't come on the market very often," says Michael Gatehouse of Savills who is selling the house for £2.5 million. "There aren't many of them and they're bought by people who tend to keep them for many years."

Havers' parents are only selling to buy something smaller – his stepfather is 100 this year. "It's a dream house," says Havers. He might consider buying Leckhampstead himself, if his filming schedule was less frenetic (he's working on a comedy series for the BBC in Manchester and filming *Brothers & Sisters* in Los Angeles). "The time will come when we'll want a house like this, in the country, with dogs and an Aga. It doesn't have to be grand, as long as it has a bit of land and accommodation for friends in a separate building. We'd need to be able to lock it up and leave when we go away." With a two-bedroom cottage, Aga and manageable gardens, Leckhampstead fits the bill.

Psychologists say that in times of economic uncertainty, the "deep-seated ideal" of home springs to mind. "The home becomes a sanctuary," says Roarie Scarisbrick of Property Vision. "People accept that the next trade-up isn't going to be possible in the next couple of years, so decide to improve instead."

This is what Leonard Thompson and his family did when economic turmoil set in 18 months ago. They had found a buyer for West Cottage, their home on Ranmore Common in Surrey, but decided to take it off the market. "We'd developed a strong tie to it, and as we already had a project in mind, we took a leap of faith and opted to stay," says Leonard. They loved the rural location but the "small, dark rooms" simply weren't big enough for their three children, nanny and au pair. So they converted the loft, and built a two-storey extension, with an open-plan kitchen. "By including double height windows in the extension we were able to bring views of the garden into the living space," says Leonard.

According to DIY website [myhammer.co.uk](http://www.myhammer.co.uk) (<http://www.myhammer.co.uk>), 85 per cent of us plan to improve our property rather than move during the recession, whether it's adding a conservatory, digging a basement or landscaping the garden. But interestingly, a major focus seems to be on the all-round experience of the house. Hugh Petter of Robert Adam architects calls it "fusing the interior with the exterior".

Directory enquiries is receiving 42 per cent more calls for conservatories, and 133 per cent more calls for garden furniture and ornaments. "People are interested in framing views from windows and controlling the experience of approaching and leaving the house," says Petter.

The all-round experience is the subject of Dream Acres, a feature series running in *Country Life* magazine. "There's little point in having a lovely house and not caring about the outside," says editor Mark Hedges. Dream Acres is a perfect 10-acre country estate, conceived by award-winning landscape designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd and artist Jonathan Myles-Lea, complete with Georgian house, kitchen garden, croquet lawn, and sweeping drive (pictured, right). By creating the ideal, Lennox-Boyd hopes to inspire home owners to make the most of their properties. "You don't have to do everything at once," she says. "But it helps to have a vision."

The approach to a house, she says, is of prime importance. "You should drive in and see the house and the landscape."

At Dream Acres, no expense has been spared in creating the walnut avenues, ha-ha, stables and swimming pool but everything can be done on a smaller scale.

Take the new kitchen at West Cottage, for example, or Leckhampstead House, where the driveway is short but angled to offer a spectacular first glance.

"You can often improve what appears to be a limited view. Capability Brown made beautiful parks from agricultural land," says John Young of Chesterton Humberts.

Carefully thought out changes will leave you with a more valuable commodity in the long run, believes Crispin Holborow. He warns though, that swimming pools, tennis courts and kitchen gardens do little more than enhance your quality of life or create a feel-good factor. "Vegetable gardens don't add to a home's value, nor do they save money, but they do add to the feeling that a house is a real home and sanctuary," he says.

Increasingly, however, this is what home owners want.

The Thompsons' vision for West Cottage is nearly complete and it's the value added to their lives that they're excited about. "Our money has certainly been better spent staying put," says Leonard.

- Leckhampstead House is for sale with Savills for £2.5 million. 01635 277700.
- www.arabellalennoxboyd.com; (<http://www.arabellalennoxboyd.com>;) www.robertadamarchitects.com

(<http://www.robertadamarchitects.com>)

What makes a perfect house

- "Too small for envy, for contempt too great," Ran Morgan, the Buying Solution.
- "Six bedrooms, six acres and six miles from the nearest station or motorway junction," Richard Addington, Savills.
- "Location, aesthetic exterior, proportions and configuration. These are impossible to feign, or costly to create," Edward Prickett, John D Wood.
- "The most important feature for a country house is its setting. It should have an elevated position to give natural stature, and a good view," Crispin Holborow, Savills.
- "It needs to feel balanced, and have integrity to its original design," Ollie Hooper, Huntly Hooper.
- "It's got to smell nice, and it must be near everything you need," Andy Buchanan, John D Wood.
- "A sanctuary, where the rooms adapt to and compliment your moods and feelings," Kelly Hoppen, [mydeco.com](http://www.mydeco.com) (<http://www.mydeco.com>)
- "A good pub and local shop are the icing on the cake," Mary Beeton, Hamptons.

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2009