

The Telegraph

STELLA

Has my move to the country all been a big mistake?

Legal wranglings over her new home threaten to upend Katie's Cornish dream

By Katie Glass 16 January 2021 • 6:00am



'It's fun exploring, but I wish that I had someone to do it with.' PHOTO CREDIT: Jooney Woodward

Weeks pass, waiting anxiously in the tree house with my life still packed-up in a London storage unit. The exchange date I'd hoped comes and goes. I kick myself for being so optimistic. To think that, even in a pandemic with half the country moving house, I could still rush through my sale in six to eight weeks.

I begin to understand why *Escape to the Country* wraps up with a couple picking a house – so we never see the tormented legal wrangling that comes next. (*Grand Designs* is more honest in this respect.)

Country properties in particular are a tangle of rights of way, flying freeholds, covenants. One house I viewed in Gloucester gave the neighbouring farmer permission to drive his cows across your garden – and he did.

My London flat was on mains water, mains electric, mains gas – you know, how normal people live. Country houses run off wood-pellet machines in bushes and septic tanks located in next door's garden. My farmhouse is on a private water system. 'No water bills!' the estate agent trilled. He's less vocal now my solicitor is trying to find out the details, about which the seller is opaque.

Meanwhile, it has become apparent my seller does not have listed building consent for various works they carried out on the Grade II-listed farmhouse: most worryingly converting an 18th-century barn into a bedroom and studio space. This was initially obfuscated because they sent my solicitor the listed building consent for the next-door house.

To change a listed building without such permission is a criminal offence. A heritage crime. Although it's hard to imagine anyone doing time for it.

'What are you in for?'

'Fitting double-glazing.'

In a worst-case scenario, the council can knock at your door and tell you to put it all back as it was.

An architect advises me this could cost tens (even hundreds) of thousands of pounds and significantly devalue the house. My solicitor advises me not to complete.

I try asking the seller to apply for retrospective consent and the estate agent tells me: 'If he was going to do that then he'd put the house back on the market for more money.' Besides, the agent says, he's got a cash buyer already willing to pay more for it.

In the tree house, I am fraught. Just as my feet were finding a place here, the floor has disappeared.

Mentally, I have already moved into the house. I have cooked imaginary dinner parties for friends and had sex in the hot tub with the plumber. I have chosen my pigs – Bert and Ernie – from the RSPCA rescue site. I've spent thousands on the survey, legal fees and searches, not to mention that I have sold my flat, [moved to Cornwall](#) and made myself homeless.

I sit at Cape Cornwall, my cheeks wet in the wind, running through the past few months wondering if it's all been a mistake. Perhaps I should go back?

You can read Katie Glass's column, What Katie did next, every Saturday at 6am on Telegraph.co.uk. Follow our [Stella Facebook page](#) for the latest from Stella Magazine, and join the [Telegraph Women Facebook group](#), a place to discuss our stories.