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TIME AND SPACE THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

RICHARD COLES

The ex vicar on his Islington pop star pad and a move to the South Downs

As a vicar you're constantly having people turn up at your house. It comes with the territory. I didn't mind unless they turned up at three in the morning. Mind you, I did once tell someone to bugger off.

Where did you grow up?

In a village called Barton Seagrave, near Kettering, Northamptonshire. Our house was built in 1959 for my parents when they got married. There was a road where all the families like mine that owned shoe-making factories lived. It was like the Bishops Avenue of Kettering. The house had four bedrooms but only one bathroom, because that's all that was considered necessary at the time. It had a big front garden with a rose bush, which I fell into while riding my tricycle. Sadly my family's shoe-making firm, which made army boots and employed hundreds of people, vanished in the 1970s due to cheap imports.

What was the first home you bought?

A two-bedroom top-floor flat in a large, four-storey Victorian terraced house in Kilburn, northwest London, for £60,000 in 1986. Did I have any wild pop parties there? Not really, though I once made lentils for Andy Bell from Erasure. Before then I'd lived in a succession of cheap, nasty rented flats, one of which was over a TV repair shop in London's Caledonian Road. A couple of years after buying the flat I bought a three-bedroom Georgian house in Barnsbury, Islington, for £160,000. I had a bit more money by then after being in the Communards [the hit Eighties band]. I thought house prices couldn't possibly go any higher.

Did you splash out on a house in the country after finding pop stardom?

I bought a four-bedroom 17th-century thatched cottage in a little village on an aristocratic Northamptonshire estate for £100,000 in about 1990. I've spent quite a bit of time there over the years but my brother and his family now live there.

Were any vicarages close to your heart?

Yes, the vicarage in Finedon, Northamptonshire, where I was vicar for 12 years. I loved the parish and the vicarage was a modern five-bedroom house. It was fit for purpose with a separate study area where I could see parishioners. The best thing about it was the big garden at the back. Once, a naked lady of ripe years turned up on my doorstep at teatime and said she wanted to marry me, but I told her I was already spoken for and asked her if she'd like a dressing gown.



From top: Coles in his Communards days with Suggs from Madness; with his dogs, Daisy and Pongo; the Sussex Downs; his living room

Where do you live now?

An 18th-century cottage with a couple of bedrooms in a small village in East Sussex where I moved last year, a couple of years after the death of my partner. I've got a lot of friends there. I'm still getting used to being part of a community where I'm not the vicar.

What do you like about living there?

It's half a mile from the sea, so I can go for lovely walks along the clifftop with my two sausage dogs, Daisy, 14, who's very creaky, and Pongo, 12, who's still full of beans. The countryside is also beautiful. I'm getting to love the South Downs' rolling hills more and more.

Favourite room?

My bedroom. I've had it done up since I moved in. It's now got its own dressing room and bathroom. These days I quite like having a little nap there in the afternoon, with the dogs beside me, listening to music. That's how exciting my life is.

What's your dream home?

If I won the lottery I'd get an architect to build me a dream house in a very remote part of the Kintyre peninsula. It's an area of Scotland I've been going to for years that is close to my heart. I do actually play the lottery. I won 30 quid the other day but that won't stretch very far.

Interview by York Membery

Murder Before Evensong by Richard Coles is published in paperback by W&N on Thursday at £8.99



HOME HELP

NEIGHBOUR'S WOOD-BURNER IS SMOKING US OUT

Q We live in a semi-rural location within a smoke control area. A new neighbour has moved into a run-down property nearby with an overgrown garden, including quite a few trees (no preservation order on them). They have installed a wood-burning stove and are steadily chopping down trees and burning them in the stove. As the wood is damp and not seasoned, the fumes and smell are very unpleasant. It gets into our house every time we open a door or window. We don't want to fall out with this neighbour but are finding the situation unbearable at times. What can we do? **RA, Lancashire**

A I am sorry to hear about your problem – I know how unpleasant the smoke from unseasoned wood can be.

As a rule of thumb, I would always recommend talking to your neighbour in the first instance. Explain the problem, set out the impact it is having on you and try to resolve the issue amicably. It is entirely possible that they are unaware of the effect their cosy fires are having on you.

If the problem continues, you have other options. In a smoke control area there is a limit on how much smoke you can release from a chimney, and you can only burn authorised fuel unless you use an "exempt appliance". But even having an "exempt appliance" does not allow you to burn absolutely anything.

The local authority is responsible for prosecuting such offences, and in England a person could be fined

between £175 and £300 if smoke has been emitted from a chimney in a smoke control area. Furthermore, a person could be fined up to £1,000 for burning unauthorised fuel without an exempt appliance (under the Clean Air Act 1993).

Authorised fuels consist primarily of smokeless fuels. A full list of all authorised fuels in England can be found on the website of the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra). Wood is an unauthorised fuel and can only be burnt within an exempt appliance.

While it is safe to assume your neighbour is burning unseasoned wood, additional important information about the type of stove, its installation and use and the actual moisture content of the wood remains unknown. Because of this, I think the local authority, and specifically the department that deals with environmental services, is probably best placed to investigate the situation.

It could also investigate whether the smoke from your neighbour's home constitutes a statutory nuisance under the Environmental Protection Act 1990. This applies if the smoke substantially interferes with the use and enjoyment of your home, or if the smoke has caused injury or is likely to cause injury to a person's health. If your neighbour is found to be in breach of the act, they can be prosecuted and served an abatement notice requiring them to stop or to limit the smoke.

James Attew, solicitor, Which? Legal

Send questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice given without responsibility

READERS' CLINIC

HOW CAN I FIND MY LOST MOBILE PHONE IN MY HOUSE?

I don't have a landline from which I can call it.
Paul Duffy, Surrey

WhatsApp call from laptop or computer, or, if applicable, ask your Apple Watch to "find my phone".

Archi Lamont, Perth

Ask Alexa to call it.
Andree McDade

Borrow a friend's mobile and ring your mobile when in your home.

Iain Harper

Lost iPhone — ask a friend to call you!

Don't let the battery go to zero before doing something about it.
D Haydon

An Apple Watch will locate a lost iPhone. I think the Cloud locates it too.
Jane Graham

Future questions
How often should I be washing bath towels and hand towels to be hygienic? I say once a week is sufficient but my partner disagrees.

Send tips and questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice given without responsibility