

The new old rectory

Clive Aslet04 August 2007 • 00:01 am



God's green earth: Chris, Josephine and Coco Vercoe at The Old Rectory, in Burton, Wiltshire, a relatively modest parsonage that dates from 1605, with a substantial new wing that was added in the late 19th century

The most handsome house in the village used to belong to the vicar.

Today, says Clive Aslet, it is the quintessential family home

- **In pictures: On offer to mere mortals**

Just as churches come in all shapes and sizes, styles and materials, so the parsonage next to it knows no set form: Georgian brickwork and columns or Gothic Revival gables and porch; a mellow and picturesque composition, redolent of leather-backed books and croquet lawns, or a draughty barracks. The variety is what makes the grouping so English. As the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner commented in the 1960s, church and parsonage together make "a feature in the village scene to which the Continent has no parallel".

A few years ago, I visited a rectory in Northamptonshire, its garden opened in aid of the church roof. Bees buzzed around hives, a daughter with Goth-black fingernails sulkily took the money for jam. "Not much central heating," commented the vicar cheerily when I asked him about the rambling, sparsely decorated mansion that was his home. "But I find some vigorous gardening before lunch warms you up."

The vicar retired and the rectory was sold. The Church of England, with all the financial acumen for which it is famous, has long followed a policy of downsizing. The result has been a boon for affluent new buyers.

According to a recent survey by Mouseprice.com, The Old Rectory is the most popular name for property above £800,000. And estate agents believe they are worth every penny. "It's rather like owning the manor house," says Nicholas Ash, of Property Vision. "It declares that you've probably got the nicest house in the village." He puts the premium at between 5 and 10 per cent. Peter Wright, of Humberts, goes

for 10 per cent, for which the real reason is that "the name gets people in to view. It has very, very powerful connotations of an Edwardian tea party existence".

Robert Godfrey, of Bidwells in Northampton, who has been instructed to sell five old rectories this year, demurs. "They may attract a slight premium because they're the original article." But James Lawrie, of Strutt & Parker, fires off both barrels with 25 per cent. "The reality is that old rectories always keep their value. The old rectory is a more manageable version of the Englishman's dream country house," he says. "There's a finite number of them, too."

A finite but quite large number. In 2005, Charles Moore, former editor of The Daily Telegraph, formed a society for people who, like him, either live in, or are interested in, old rectories, and who meet to discuss ancient tithe maps in the same way that Bentley owners compare sprockets.

The very existence of the club demonstrates the affection that owners hold for these buildings; and such is its popularity that this month it is launching its own website. Mr Moore calculates that there must be as many as 15,000 of them, when you add in the old canonries, deaneries, manses, vicarages and glebes. A perfect Georgian example can be found in Helston, Cornwall, on the market with Knight Frank for £1 million (01392 423111; www.knightfrank.co.uk). Built out of shimmering local granite, The Old Vicarage is one of the most handsome houses in the town. The clergyman of the day was lucky to have it - or rather, Helston was lucky to have a resident clergyman. This was the age of "plurality", when one rector might hold more than one benefice. Although Jane Austen's estimable Colonel Brandon intended to improve the parsonage at Delaford for Edward Ferrars, other gentry who had livings in their gift were more negligent; selling them to the highest bidder was common practice (as John Dashwood, another character from Sense and Sensibility, makes clear - "livings fetch such a price").

Many parsonages fell into ruin. From 1782, Gilbert's Act - named after Thomas Gilbert, the MP who carried it through the House of Commons - allowed clergymen to raise mortgages from a fund called Queen Anne's Bounty, which could then be paid back through their own and future incumbents' income; but the opportunity was not generally taken up until the Victorians set about reforming the Church of England.

By the time of Trollope, clergy were expected to live where they served. Clearly, the modest parsonage, dating from 1605, that the Rev F T Woodward found at Burton, in Wiltshire, was not going to suit a family of 11 daughters. He built a substantial, new wing in 1873, commemorating the date in a tablet with his initials. The diocese sold it to a private owner in the late 1950s. Six years ago, Chris Vercoe and his wife, Josephine, bought the house, having sold their double-fronted home in Balham, south London.

Their daughter, Coco, had just been born and they were looking for a family home, as well as a project: Mr Vercoe used to work for Terence Conran, while Mrs Vercoe, a management consultant, is a keen gardener. As you pull into the driveway, the seven-bedroom house, with square-towered, warm-stone church in the background,

appears spruce but authentic. So people - there are quite a lot of them - who come looking for the vicar find a surprise.

Vicars cannot afford to divide their gardens into compartments with drystone walls and fountains. Indoors, clerical gloom has been banished by white floors, blonde wood and sparse furniture.

"There is not a curtain in the house. We have repaired or remade shutters in every room," says Mr Vercoe. "We have also removed ceilings that had been lowered to save heat. There used to be just eight radiators; there are now 39." However, with Coco, now nearly seven, at school in Bath, the Vercoes have decided to relocate there.

Pugin Hall, Rampisham, a Grade I-listed house in Dorset also offered by Savills, does not rejoice in the name of Old Rectory, yet that is what it is. The Church authorities did not permit the use of any clerical term in the re-christening. It was built by the great A W N Pugin in 1846-47. As a Catholic convert, he worked little for the established Church: most of his domestic commissions were country houses for Catholic grandees.

However, the rector of Rampisham, F W Rooke, was both a friend and an Anglo-Catholic (sufficiently High Church to be acceptable). Typically, the previous parsonage had fallen into such disrepair that it was pulled down.

The house that Pugin designed for Rooke is similar to his own home at Ramsgate, The Grange, recently restored by the Landmark Trust. Unlike Pugin, a passionate sailor who used to supplement his income by claiming wrecks (having rescued their sailors) on stormy nights, Rooke had no need of a look-out tower; but in some ways, Pugin Hall makes a more satisfactory composition.

Inside, handsomely proportioned rooms are equipped with plain, stone fireplaces and simple joinery. Pugin ensured that servants were architecturally well-treated: the kitchen has a fine outlook and the attic fireplaces are as good as those on the principal floors.

The owner, who has been restoring Pugin Hall over a period of years, is now bequeathing the task to another family - preferably architectural enthusiasts - who can take advantage of local schools, horse-riding trails and the nearby coast. The price is £1.25 million. Life at the old rectory moves on.

- Clive Aslet is editor at large of 'Country Life'.
- The Old Rectory, Burton, Wiltshire, is for sale at £1.75 million through Savills (01225 474500)

What is a rector?

In medieval times, a rector (from the Latin *regere*, to rule) was the church's administrator in the parish. He was not necessarily a priest, but was responsible for providing church services, keeping the buildings in repair and apportioning the

income from tithes. He was also entitled to farm the land directly owned by the church, called the glebe.

- The Rectory Society's website, to be launched on August 17, is www.rectorysociety.org.uk

10 things we love about old rectories

1

Usually the best house in the village.

2

High ceilings.

3

Plenty of handsomely sized rooms.

4

Loads of bedrooms.

5

Quiet neighbours (in the churchyard).

6

A few acres of garden.

7

Overlooks a beautiful church (usually).

8

The churchyard cannot be built over.

9

Croquet lawns.

10

Handy for bellringers.