

# Why living in an old rectory remains the ultimate dream for house hunters



The Old Rectory in Leicestershire is £995,000, both with Savills

- [Eleanor Doughty](#)

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Few homes have been so romanticised as the rectory. Also known as the parsonage or the vicarage, the fine house in the village once lived in by the local clergyman has starred in many novels; estate agents selling such properties in the country might thank Jane Austen for their great fortune.

Often, these grand houses were built for the younger sons of landowners – the first inherited, the second went into the army and the third into the church.

As such, the best rectories are often large, comfortable family homes with fine architecture and luscious gardens. In her book *The Wry Romance of the Literary Rectory*, the author Deborah Alun-Jones describes the archetypal Georgian rectory as the “embodiment of the English rural idyll”.

Robbie Kerr of Adam Architecture, who grew up visiting his grandparents’ rectory in Oxfordshire, says the pastoral life that these houses offer is part of the charm – even if owners today might be more willing to lose a few acres in return for a house they can lock up and leave. “Rectories represent an ideal as much now as they did when originally built.”

The rectory remains sought after, attracting a premium of between 10 and 20 per cent, according to Savills. Average values rose by 1.8 per cent last year, compared to a

0.1 per cent increase across the wider country house market. Meanwhile, figures from Hamptons show that the average profit on a Georgian property is almost £163,000; just five per cent of sellers make a loss.



Hockworthy House in Devon is £3.95 million with Knight Frank

As the best-known image of the rectory is a handsome, well-proportioned Georgian family home, it is no wonder that estate agents are gleeful when a rectory comes to market. Buyers are actively hunting them out, says Rupert Sweeting, a partner with Knight Frank. “Ask eight out of 10 buyers in the million-pound-plus category what they’re looking for, and they’ll say, ‘Rural location, an old rectory would be nice.’”

**It’s rather a fascinating subject to see how rectories developed, and the effect they have had on society**

Ben Horne, a country house buying agent at Middleton Advisors, agrees. “They are the archetypal village house. We all want to live in the best village house and the rectory is so often it,” he says. But like any historic home, a rectory can be expensive to run, he adds, “having been designed for an era where log fires and shutters were the method of keeping the house warm”.

Nevertheless, the rectory remains top of buyers’ wishlists. “I think the allure of the rectory is partly the scale,” says Francis Terry, a classical architect. “They are large but not overwhelming. They work well for the modern family, with enough scale to enjoy a certain degree of luxury, but not so big that they become a burden.”



James and Philippa D'Arcy live at Wickham House, a former rectory in Berkshire CREDIT: ANDREW CROWLEY

This desire for a house in the country was what led James D'Arcy and his wife Philippa to buy Wickham House, their Georgian former rectory in Berkshire, in 2006. It's big, with nine bedrooms and the full works of reception space: dining, drawing and sitting rooms, a library and a family kitchen.

“Even though it's a big house it doesn't feel like a big house. It feels very homely,” D'Arcy says.

This timeless interest in the rectory extends beyond buying and selling. In 2006, Charles Moore, the former Telegraph editor, set up The Rectory Society, a group for enthusiasts. He mooted the idea in a piece published in 2005, in which he wrote that the rectory symbolised “English life at our national zenith – its comfort, its sturdiness, its compliance, its elegance, its tamed rusticity, its charm.”

Today the society has more than 600 members, and no, you don't have to own a rectory to join. “It's really for people who are interested in the architecture,” says Amanda Ponsonby, a founding member. “It's rather a fascinating subject to see how rectories developed, and the effect they have had on society.

“If there hadn't been all the books in those parsonages in the 18th and 19th centuries, there wouldn't have been half the literature that we have ended up with.”



A vicarage in Nailsworth, Gloucestershire, is £1.75 million with Strutt & Parker

She gives the example of Thomas Hardy, who was an architect before his interest in reading books borrowed from the poet William Barnes' parsonage in Came, Dorset, led to his career change and subsequent rise to become one of Britain's great novelists. Jane Austen drafted stories which would eventually become *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* in her childhood home, a rectory in Steventon, Hampshire.

The literary legacy of the rectory lives on today. These houses "have something magical" about them, says crime author Peter James, who lives in a rectory just outside Brighton, with a menagerie of animals including a cat, two dogs, five alpacas and a garden of wild animals. "Quite a lot of artistic-minded people live in rectories," he says. "I'm deeply sympathetic to old houses and find them very inspiring."

(Not all writers, mind. Jeffrey Archer lives in The Old Vicarage in Grantchester, the former home of the poet Rupert Brooke, but says his books are "mainly written in Majorca when the weather is good".)

Ponsonby lives in her own 19th-century rectory, near Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire. It is a big house, positioned with a perfect view overlooking the Ponsonbys' newly-restored sheep wash, an old structure for cleaning their flock. There's something about the rectory, Ponsonby says. "I don't think I've been into many that I've really disliked."



Mary and Charlie Keen recently sold their rectory in Gloucestershire CREDIT: ANDREW CROWLEY

Those who live in them are well aware of their selling points. Mary Keen, the celebrated garden designer and *Telegraph* writer, recently sold her seven-bedroom rectory in Gloucestershire in order to downsize; she and her husband Charles had lived there for 25 years.

“I’ve lived in four rectories over the years,” Keen says. “We lived in one near Grantham in Lincolnshire with round windows, which my mother-in-law said was ‘very Tennysonian, darling.’”

**As congregations fall and vicars take on larger parishes, the church is definitely seeing a surplus in properties**

The church on her Gloucestershire estate dates back to the 12th century, but the house’s three-storey stone facade is a Georgian addition, commissioned by a former rector and paid for out of his own pocket. “By the time he’d finished, the house was bigger than the church,” says Charles.

But in today’s market, that makes for a popular property. “The agent told us people would either love it or not get it at all,” says Mary, and they “seem to have loved it”.

This didn’t come as a surprise for selling agent Luke Morgan of Strutt & Parker. “Everyone wants to live in an old rectory and there aren’t many of them around.”



This vicarage in Lemsford, Herts, is £2.45 million with Strutt and Parker

Should you wish to live out your own pastoral life in the country, renting a rectory is another possibility. Ben De'Ath of Cheffins manages the Old Rectory in Debden, near Saffron Walden, Essex.

Over the last seven years, a series of families have snapped up the property on long-term lets. "We have been approached numerous times to see if the Church would sell the property but they would rather keep it within their assets," De'Ath says.

But they are willing to take tenants. "As congregations fall and vicars take on larger parishes, the church is definitely seeing a surplus in properties and can take the option to rent them out to generate a steady income."

You are guaranteed a good landlord, too. "As an organisation it is realistic about rental values," De'Ath says. But renting a rectory from the Church, like renting everywhere else, does come with cosmetic barriers. "Similar to renting from large country estates, the Church will not necessarily carry out expensive renovations to provide mod-cons, which can be expected from some tenants," De'Ath says.

But, he adds, "the beautiful sash windows, light and airy rooms and impressive fireplaces are more than enough to offset a marginally tired kitchen."