

# We moved back to memory lane

Adrian Sherratt/London Media/Dave Hogan/Getty

Nostalgic buyers are going back to their roots to snap up their childhood homes.

**Zoe Dare Hall** meets the families who love living in the past

It was the difficult-to-open doorknobs that gave Tom Hood that Proustian moment when, in his mid-forties, he moved back to the house in Bristol where he'd spent his teenage years.

"My sons, who are now 14 and 18, couldn't open the door to the cellar and were amazed that I instantly knew you had to lift up the handle and flick it," Hood says. "That's what I used to do as a boy to escape my sister when she was tearing after me at 80mph."

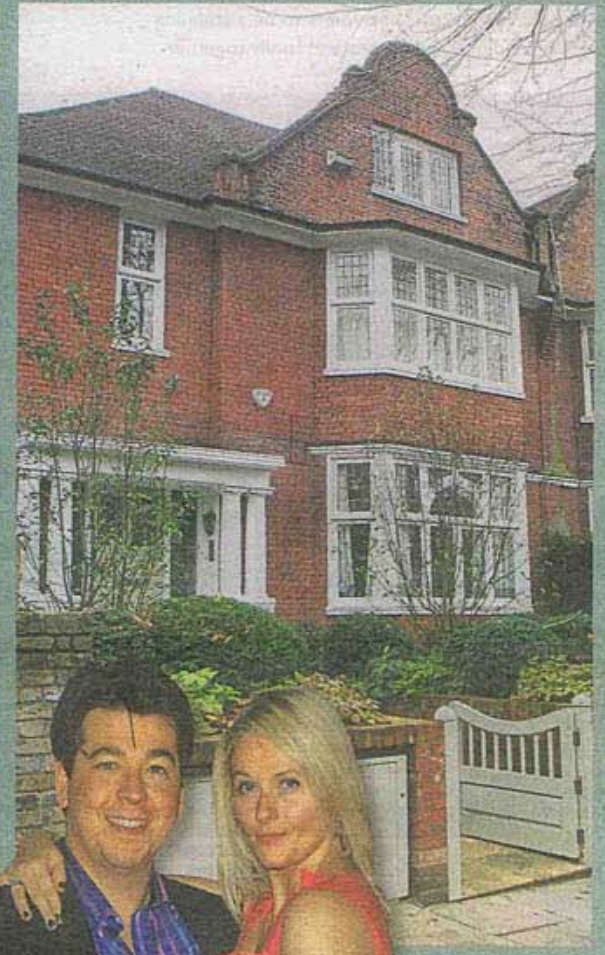
Hood's parents originally bought the detached five-bedroom house, in the suburb of Westbury-on-Trym, for £9,500 in 1971, but when their children had grown up and left home, they sold it in the mid-1990s for £250,000. "I'd always wanted this house again as an adult," says Hood, 50, who is the managing partner of Hydes of Bristol, an estate agency in the Clifton area of the city. "It's a very special house to me, hidden away down a single-track lane."

To hear many people talk about property, it can all sound like one relentless, ruthless exercise in trading up and moving on for financial gain. But just occasionally, going back is the most tempting option, especially when it means returning to one's childhood home. Hood was so keen to repossess that house that he posted his business card through the letter-box, asking the owner to contact him if she ever decided to sell. Two years later, she did, and Tom took his wife, Judith, 48, to view the property he had talked about so fondly.

"My mother rang me straightaway and told me not to bully Judith into buying the house, but I didn't need to," recalls Hood. "The moment we walked in, Judith gave me the thumbs up. It was amazing, fantastic."

Many of the original Georgian features were still there, which helped to re-create the character and nostalgia that Hood hankered after. That's not to say there haven't been any surreal moments. "When our youngest, Harry, couldn't sleep, I'd lie on his bed with him and stare up at the same cracks in the ceiling that I used to look at when I was young."

You would imagine an



The comedian Michael McIntyre, pictured with his wife, Kitty, spent £3.2m on a house in north London, above, on the street where he grew up



**"WHEN OUR SON COULDN'T SLEEP, I'D LIE ON HIS BED WITH HIM AND STARE AT THE SAME CRACKS IN THE CEILING I USED TO LOOK AT"**

Tom Hood with his sister, Joanna, in 1975, at their Bristol home; and today, with his wife, Judith, and sons, Harry and George

estate agent to be pragmatic about his own house purchase, prioritising investment potential over emotions, but Hood admits that sentimentality won out. "We paid top dollar for the house and our pensions are entirely wrapped up in it, but it's a house for life," he says. "It will play a major part in our lives and our children's lives."

Since memories — good or bad — of our childhood stay with us forever, it's no wonder we go to all sorts of inventive lengths to re-create the feel of that first family home. Michael Owen, the Manchester United striker, bought a whole street near Chester, where he was born, to house his extended family. Others, such as the comedian Michael McIntyre, are so keen on moving back that they make do with a house in the same road. McIntyre, 35, spent £3.2m on a six-bedroom, three-bathroom house in north London, where his lives with his wife, Kitty, an aromatherapist,

and their two children, Lucas, 6, and Oscar, 3. He said at the time "I find myself looking at the bricks, touching them," counting them even, thinking, "Are there enough?"

Some can never even bear to leave: the singer Joss Stone bought her Devon family home when she was only 20, after her parents divorced.

Pure nostalgia may not be the driving force behind moving back home, of course; it may simply be a great house. "Sometimes, as Freud said, a cigar is just a cigar. It might be possible that the property could just be very nice and in a lovely area," says Avy Joseph, co-founder of the College of Cognitive Behavioural Hypnotherapy. "But from a psychological perspective, fond, warm memories of a happy childhood — the place where we felt secure, safe and loved — remain with us for a long time. There is a powerful magnet to draw you back to that place."

But, he warns that if you are looking to re-create those early days, rather than just enjoy the location in which they took place, it can lead to disappointment. "Our memories are of the people as much as the place, but your mum and dad, your old neighbours and friends won't be there any more, and the dog won't come running when you open the door," he says. "As it's a huge purchase, most of us can hold on to those memories but remain rational about whether the house is the best place for us now."

Perhaps it's the urge to return to somewhere reassuringly familiar, the perceived comfort of the past, in an uncertain economic climate. Or maybe it's a more practical desire to have the kind of family home that is always in demand, "which you know will always sell easily," says Rupert Sweeting, head of Knight Frank's country department, who recently sold a house in Sussex to a lady whose grandparents had owned it

when she was a child. "Her face lit up when she saw it, and she said she had to buy it as it transported her back to when she was young."

Whatever the reason, Sweeting says that he is seeing more buyers wanting to return to their roots, especially outside the London commuter belt in North Yorkshire, the Cotswolds and the Herefordshire/Shropshire borders.

"People want to bring up their children in the way that they grew up. They want fresh air, ponies in the paddock, a decent-sized house with a few acres — whatever re-creates their own childhood."

For Guy Leaning, the yearning was so strong that he went to the extreme of building a replica of his

and saw a For Sale sign," says Brummitt, whose parents had bought the house in 1976 for £45,000. They ran a saddlery business from the forge buildings, and reluctantly sold up during the early 1980s recession.

"It was a purely sentimental thing to buy it again," says Brummitt, who paid £350,000 for the sprawling, beamed six-bedroom house with six acres of gardens, paddocks and a large lake. He spent a further £400,000 restoring it.

His parents thought he was mad, "and some things about moving back were bizarre at first, such as sleeping in my mum and dad's old bedroom," he says. "But I've been able to enjoy the property far more than they could, as they had to work far harder than me," he admits.

Now that the eldest four children have left home — even though they still all work together in the family business, based in the forge — the house feels too big for the remaining Brummitts. They put it on the market for £765,000 earlier in the year and it has now gone under offer. "It's an expensive property to keep, as there's a lot of land and buildings needing maintenance, so we're selling it to use the money to fund the business," Brummitt says. "But it's been a wonderful experience bringing up our family here — and, ironically, after all the money I've spent restoring it, the house now looks the same as when I was a child."

Rodden Manor, a beautiful Elizabethan manor house near Frome in Somerset, set in 31 acres with brooks running through the garden, also holds powerful early memories for its owner, Rory Ingleby-MacKenzie, who spent his entire childhood there. There were the long hot summer days of the early 1960s, "playing in the garden, enjoying my father becoming a farmer after his military life," says Ingleby-MacKenzie, 56, operations director of Haig Housing Trust. His parents' lavish cocktail parties were also unforgettable, as was watching the 1961 FA Cup final. Then there were the months Rory was driven to school on a tractor during the big freeze in 1963 "and moving eggs on my sledge from our poultry house across the fields".

When he inherited the house in the late 1980s, after his father had died and his mother moved out, it needed more work than Rory and his wife, Sara, now 52, a sculptor, could then contemplate. "The kitchen had a Belfast sink that drained directly into the river and my parents always felt that the hot pipe running through my bedroom qualified as central heating," he says.

So he chose to let it out — including to one tenant who had also lived there as a child, "and dreamt of coming back to live in this magical house". The pull couldn't be resisted forever, though, and the couple moved in with their children, Natasha and Roly, now aged 21 and 19, in 2005.

"The timing was right for the children's schooling and it was a case of now or never. It was a little weird at first, but less so than if we'd moved straight in after my parents left. Two sets of tenants and a 15-year gap had exorcised ghosts and made the place feel and look different," he says. "We have been privileged to live in a lovely and historic place — in my case, for nearly 60 years," says Ingleby-MacKenzie, who has put the property on the market for £2.5m (01225 474543, savills.co.uk) "but it's time for another family to write the next chapter."

And who knows — maybe their own story will, like his, be in two instalments, too.

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