

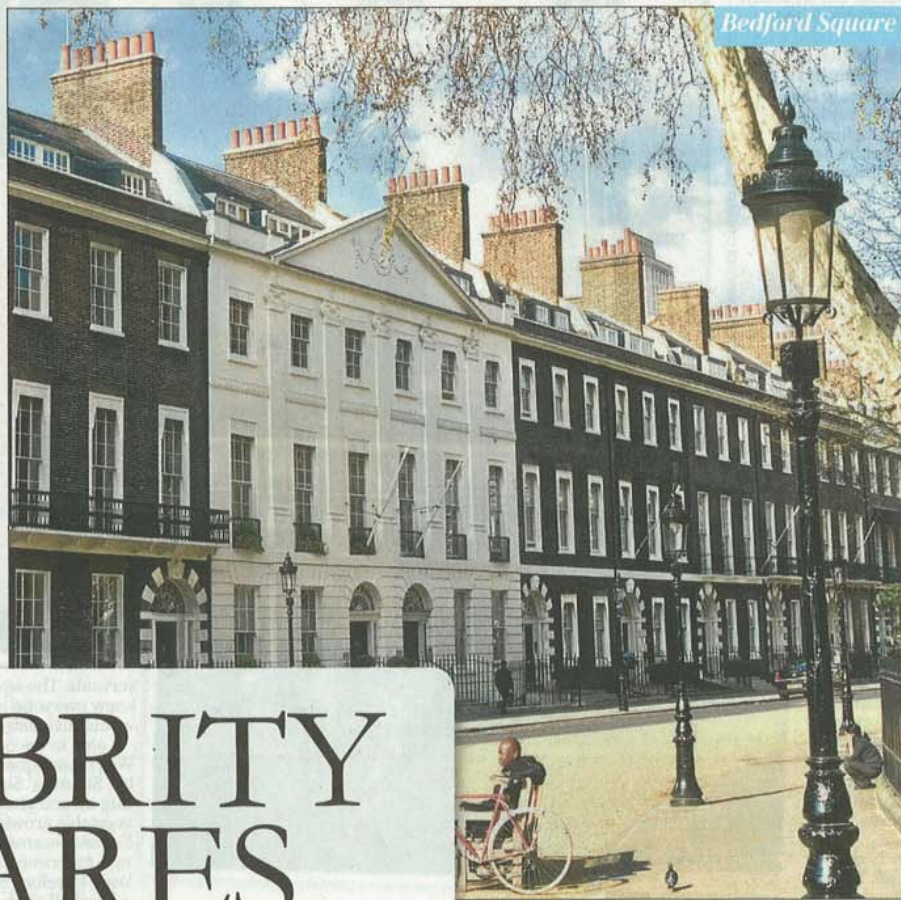
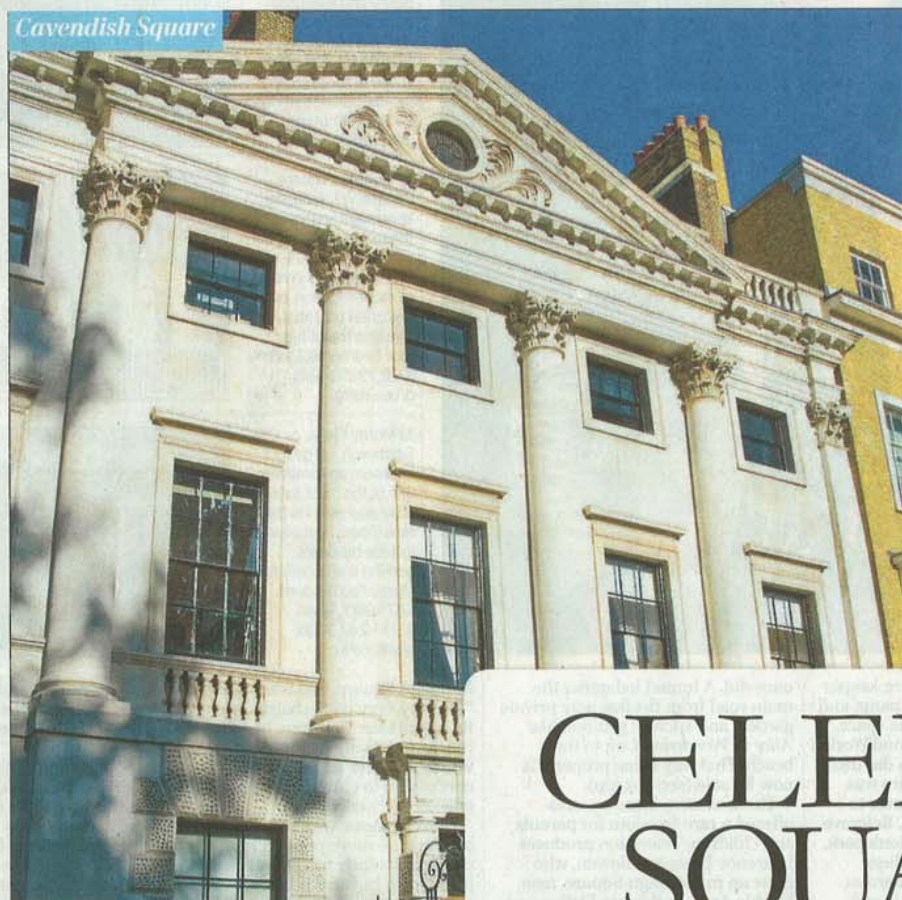


**Ticking all the boxes**  
**Surf the container wave**  
Page 3

**French fancies**  
**Homes fit for le Président**  
Pages 4 & 5

**Alison Cork**  
**Spring sales guide**  
Page 9

The Daily Telegraph



## CELEBRITY SQUARES

Garden squares continue to fetch record prices, defying the recession. **Genevieve Fox** looks at the enduring popularity of this uniquely British way of life



Some of the grandest properties in Britain are not our stately homes or palaces, but those built around garden squares. They may not be on the scale of Highclere Castle or Chatsworth, yet like their monumental cousins, these elegant buildings were designed to bring pleasure and prestige. And they still do, commanding recession-busting prices.

Quite right, too, says historian Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, author of *The London Squares: Gardens in the Midst of Town*, a new book celebrating this quintessential feature of town life. For him, the

imposing Georgian terraces of Eaton Square or the white stuccoed villas of Ladbroke Square, west London, are paradisaical. They offer a civilised, prescriptive and communal way of living, that the country estate or the ordinary terrace cannot.

One of Longstaffe-Gowan's favourite squares is Edwarde Square in west London, where a two-bedroom flat in a Georgian town house will cost in the region of £850,000. A seven-bedroom town house in Chester Square, where neighbours include Baroness Thatcher, is currently on the market for £32.5 million.

Not cheap, then, and increasing all the time. But when you buy a house on a square, you don't just get the building. You also get a key to a private garden, shared with only a handful of others.

That's what makes living there so magical. "They are a brilliant idiosyncrasy," says Longstaffe-Gowan, himself a fine specimen of a British dandy. When we meet in his rooftop offices in Smithfield he is sporting a floral shirt, leopard-print waistcoat and jacket. "Squares have been part of London life for centuries," he says. "They are bizarre social organisms that are very much about shared values.

"People are terribly nostalgic about them. They have immense emotional appeal, and also feed our very British obsession with ownership, land, gardens and privacy."

These properties have always drawn the rich and famous. Only last year, the Academy-Award winning actress, Cate Blanchett sold her home on Bryanston Square, one down from Montagu, which itself played home to Ringo Starr, Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon and Yoko Ono. But these are only some

Continued overleaf

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### Cover story

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Continued from page 1

of the most recent celebrity buyers in a long tradition. In his book, Longstaffe-Gowan examines the evolution of squares from the 17th century.

"It was the most natural thing in the world for country people, to sit around an open space," he says in his eager, professorial tones. "They were more interested in views, than in the garden itself."

It was for this reason that many so-called squares, including Cavendish and Hanover, in the West End, were originally built on three sides. A "square" was a descriptive term for crescents, circuses and polygons. As for the trees that are such a selling point for buyers today, they were introduced only in the 19th century.

Landowners were guided by the classical notion of *rus in urbe*, or bringing nature to the city. Exclusivity was always part of the package, long before the Parliamentary Enclosure Acts of the 18th and 19th centuries. "The wish was to enclose in order to embellish," says Longstaffe-Gowan.

Their design evolved over the years. In Georgian times, most squares were made from red brick and unpainted stucco. The Victorians preferred a wider range of styles, including Queen Anne and Jacobean architecture.

The gardens have been used for many things apart from private recreation. During the early days, residents of Lincoln's Inn complained about the disgusting mess that Cromwell's troops had left after they had assembled there.

In the 18th century squares were identified as potential "Wilderness-Works," places where birds and wildlife would flourish, and which would improve the quality of the air. Later on, however, "wilderness" took on a second meaning, as squares became forums for illicit sexual activities.

In the 19th century, the focus turned to their health-promoting qualities. Industrial London was covered in thick smog, and many green spaces had already been sold off. Town planners tried and failed to get garden owners to open them, but the public went to great lengths to gain access. "Sick children were lowered over the railings of Portman Square for fresh air," says Longstaffe-Gowan. "Elsewhere, babies were wrapped in silk, like Moses, and left."

Yet the keys have always been



Home front: Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, top, has written a new book on the history of London's garden squares; the damage done to Eaton Square during the Blitz, above

tightly controlled. "There's usually a dragon or two who run the garden committee. They guard the access," he adds.

This protectiveness also means there has always been a market in false keys. "Beadles used to sell them for money, and owners were told to hide their keys from their

servants. The square keeper knew everyone by name and would invigilate the space."

Later, in the Second World War, many squares did their bit. St James' Square was dug up and given over to vegetable growing. Belgrave Square became a tank park, and American soldiers used Hereford Square as a baseball pitch. Air raid shelters were built in Soho and Manchester squares.

Squares aren't just a feature of life in London, either. They're all over the UK, from Glasgow to York to Bath. For several years I lived in Lewes Crescent, a Grade I listed Georgian terrace overlooking Brighton's seafront, as Lewis Carroll

once did. A tunnel led under the main road from the five-acre private garden, and spewed you out, like *Alice in Wonderland*, on to the beach. That very same property is now for sale (see box top).

Then, as now, these squares offered a rare freedom for parents and children. Television producer Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen, who grew up in Montagu Square, near Marble Arch, in the late Sixties and Seventies, recalls how "ownership of a golden key gave you access to a Narnia-style play land. There were Cowboys and Indians and hose fights in summer."

Not all garden square veterans are so keen on the screaming of tiny lungs, however. Social commentator Peter York lived in

Montagu Square, and was once "the very, very bad" chairman of its committee. Children, he tells me, were its only carbuncle. "I wanted to drive them out. I saw my concession to children as the thin edge of the wedge."

Most disagree with him. Garden squares are more popular than ever, particularly with families. Not just British buyers, either. "Many of our garden square clients are European or American," says Simon Hedley of Druce estate agents. "They're attracted to the history, the quirky style and the traditional feel these homes offer," he says.

Lucian Cook, director of research at Savills, agrees. "A well managed, intact square, particularly with a

private garden and classic period architecture, will always command a premium and represent a recession-proof investment."

Some squares are now ghosts of their former selves, but others have been wonderfully maintained. You can stand in many of our great cities, just metres from a busy road, and feel you are in the countryside. It's no wonder that a home on a garden square is even more coveted now than it has been for the past 400 years.

*The London Square* (Yale Press) is published on May 23. It is available to order through Telegraph Books: £26 plus £1.25 p&p (0844 871 1515; books.telegraph.co.uk).  
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### For sale

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● **Chester Square, London SW1.** A recently renovated seven-bedroom town house, with four receptions, gym, lift, garage, cinema room and attractive roof garden. Interior designed by Finchilton. £32.5m, Savills (020 7730 0822; savills.com).
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● **Five House, a Grade I listed, five-bedroom Regency town house,** planned by Charles Busby and executed by Thomas Kemp, on Lewes Crescent, Brighton. It is located in one of East Sussex's most stunning settings. £3.2m, Hamptons (hamptons.co.uk).
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● **Montagu Square, London W1.** A duplex apartment spanning the main building and a mews house at the rear. The property is in need of modernisation, but has great potential. The apartment has four bedrooms. £1.6m (020 7935 6535; druce.com).
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● **Moray Place, Edinburgh.** Large four bedroom apartment in one of the most sought-after addresses in the New Town. Features include residents' parking and access to Moray Feu Gardens. £675,000, Savills (0131 247 3700; savills.com).