



# the urban ruralist

By Caroline Phillips

I'm not the type who finds it pleasurable to relieve myself behind trees or have calamitous journeys just to get lost in country lanes littered with reeking mounds of bovine excrement. (Personally, I'd poop-scoop cow pats.) Others may enjoy the experience of losing their mobile signal and collecting blackberries with not a BlackBerry in sight. Not me.

I regard the country as long-haul travel and, therefore, best enjoyed retrospectively. Or, better still, only savoured in anticipation, by poring over rural porn. (Think websites showing thatched gastro establishments.)

The problem with the country for me is that there are no pavements, only worn Barbour and lousy cappuccinos. No pavements is bad for the Jimmy Choos. The rest is bad for my stylish, bohemian, intellectual, urbanite soul. Just thinking of the country – all that ferreting, badger-baiting, surveying outdoor composting loos, wearing Driza-Bones and doing pond management courses – makes me feel faint.

But I'm married to BJ, a bee-keeping, sloe-loving but urban-dwelling chap who reluctantly lives with me in Notting Hill – he just doesn't get the pure, edgy joy of city life, with its hip restaurants, carbon emissions, designer boutiques and energising road rage, racial tensions and noise pollution. His prejudice against our postcode is as entrenched as the mud on

his Hunter wellies. Which may be why, even in town, he likes wearing those shooting jackets with plastic pockets for secreting dead things. (To me, 'country fashion' is an oxymoron.)

We also have two daughters, both at that age when they think the country a Good Thing – and who are nagging us to keep a Thelwell pony in our roof garden. Despite (or perhaps because of) my endless bribes to them of (teenage nirvana) Juicy Couture velour tracksuits, they

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remain steadfastly passionate about all matters equestrian. It must be in the genes.

BJ is selling the country to me, saying that there are now rural heavens where property costs as much as Kensington, 'weekender' isn't a dirty word and they have organic grocery deliveries, underfloor heating and swimming pools with underwater speakers and plasma screens. (I'm sure it never rains there either.)

With all this in mind, I've agreed, over the months, to cast a beady urbanite eye over cottages that look like dilapidated tug boats but

have the potential to become minimalist, eco-friendly dreams; and to brave those horsey laughs to travel intrepidly to investigate on your behalf that upmarket pony club, Somerset health spa or quaint Cornish pub selling Tom Archer-style award-winning sausages. And I'll stop by an agricultural show to see what people do with animals when they don't turn them into carpaccio or coats.

I'll attend a church fête to see who has grown the biggest (ahem) carrot; hang out with the WI to make damson jam and strip off my Marni shirt to become a calendar girl; visit a working farm where kids learn that milk doesn't come from cartons; drop by to scour an antiques fair in a field, or stay in an off-the-beaten track B&B.

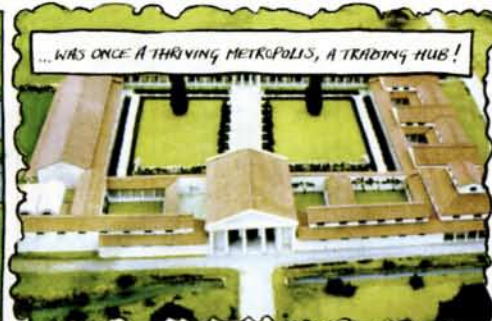
Yes, I'll dip my pedicured nails into the ever-faster-moving stream that is now country life. I may borrow scissors from Nicky Clarke to shear a sheep, forage New Forest porcini for risotto, make a groovy willow hurdle to pen cattle or brew some elderflower wine. I might even enjoy learning to lay a hedge, although frankly, *entre nous*, there are more enticing saplings to lay in London.

I may not linger long out of London. You can take the girl out of town. But can you take the town out of the girl?

If you have country invitations for our *Urban Ruralist*, please send them to [urbanruralist@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:urbanruralist@hotmail.co.uk)

The Weekenders

by Digby  
[www.digbylondon.com](http://www.digbylondon.com)





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My husband, BJ, suffers from what American psychiatrists term Rural Deficit Disorder – RDD – which makes him talk about pot-bellied pigs and jam-making. But I know the Rustic Idyll turns out to be mostly about couples entertaining themselves by swapping keys, or getting inadvertently sprayed with organophosphates.

So I accept with leaping (metropolitan) heart Mollie Dent-Brocklehurst and co-curator Elliot McDonald's invitation to a Summer Party at Sudeley Castle to celebrate *Reconstruction #2*, a cutting-edge exhibition organised with auction house Philips de Pury. Sadly 'art' and 'country' are found together as often as ice cream and anchovies, so I love the idea that Hoxton has decamped to the Cotswolds.

Sudeley is, as you know, the romantic castle where Liz Hurley married; and Mollie is its part owner. Suitably, BJ wants to travel there in his ATV, first cousin, he says, of the Chelsea tractor. It's a four-wheeled motor bicycle with large low ground pressure tyres, ideal for chasing sheep up hills. I suggest we leave it for another celebration. 'Like when we're leaving the divorce court,' I add sweetly.

On arrival, we're handed a Thousand Acre Wood-style map (complete with thumb prints and ink splodges) indicating the whereabouts of *No Rain* and 15 al fresco artworks: the piece by Conrad Shawcross is 'in the pond'; Adel Abdessemed's 'in the doorway'; and Keith

Tyson's 'on the bit above the rose garden.' The first, a fairground ride-style whizzing mechanical sculpture, is making the resident ducks act as if they're on acid at Thorpe Park; Abdessemed's is light fantastic, a massive must-have neon depiction of a brain; and Tyson's yellow hoop tunnel spied from the heady setting of the antique rose garden? Marvellously urban. Pure McDonald's.

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I go to the lavatory, where two women fall out of one cubicle. (I think I prefer the rural tradition of One Man, One Loo.) I wonder if one will offer me a line, but she doesn't look like the fishing type.

Back outside in the groovy contemporary sculpture park – set midst the exquisite knot garden, box hedging, topiary yews and Tudor ruins – BJ and I wander with hundreds of guests in Dover Street Market garb, white plastic catsuits or, suffering urban chilliness, Alice Temperley with three jumpers.

There's artist and taxidermist Polly Morgan in PVC trousers and baby blue Hunter wellies (but sans stuffed Labrador). Actress Katrina Boorman gamely sporting an entire flower-garden on her head. And socialites and

international luxury lifestyle brands, Ashley and Allegra Hicks. But although their artwork is present in the bushes, I can't find Tim Noble and Sue Webster, enfants terribles of contemporary art, whose self-portraits have been made from garbage and dead animals. Maybe they don't look like that in real life.

These are Stalwart Art Folk (SAF) who've just done the Biennale, Basle, Documenta and the London auctions but clearly can't get enough of each other. They walk in stilettos through disinfectant into the pheasantry, trot in gold wedges onto the mosaic floor of the private chapel and sit on pouffes in the Moroccan souk-style tent – praying they'll be picked to appear in *Boogie Woogie*, a forthcoming film of the book that's set in the art world and directed by Mollie's husband, Duncan Ward. 'With special artwork by Damien Hirst,' confides one SAF.

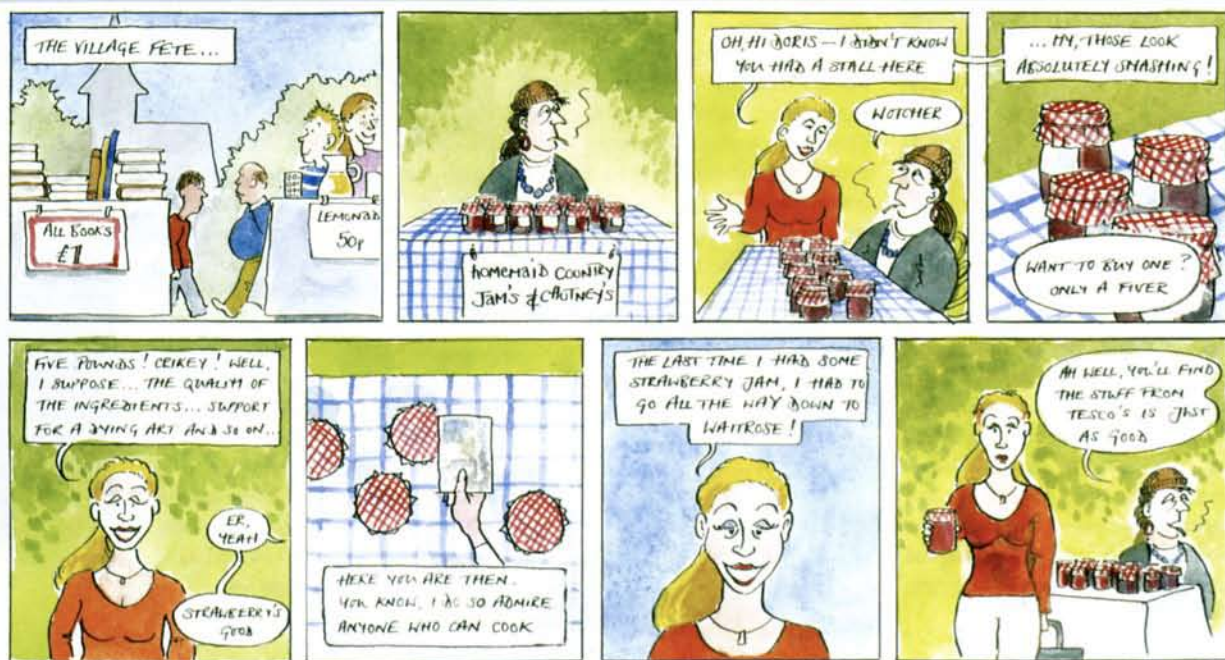
Then we eat an excellent dinner of hog roast, an entire field of lambs' shoulders and mountains of salads while listening to live music by the crooner Duke of Beaufort: 'Is Harry Worcester doing a *Joseph* audition?' asks my neighbour.

Sudeley was a 'safe house' for the Tate's works during the Blitz. Now its gardens are providing a fabulous backdrop for new works. The Serpentine party may be the summer's hottest. But, boy, this is the (rural) warm-up...

Exhibition at Sudeley Castle, Winchcombe, Gloucestershire until 31 October.

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The countryside, so my spies in Cath Kidston wellies tell me, has changed beyond recognition. The values of London, a global financial centre, have spread into the mud. Nowadays country life, apparently, is very much about *urbe in rus*. Global warming has made Gloucestershire an outpost of Marrakech. The countryside no longer does bleak weather. Nor chintz.

'I don't have to run my iPod off a tractor battery anymore,' I tell my husband BJ, as I put my foot gingerly into our rus-bound car. Our two daughters, squabbling over personal DVDs, scowl from the back seat. In our family, long-haul arguments start within a metre of our home. Now we're going to Babington House, the original country hotel for media couples and their media babies. So today the kids have 90 miles to hone their fighting tactics.

These days, so I'm informed, you leave the city only for flat-screens in the bathrooms, beds the size of Wiltshire and restaurants that serve breakfast until dinner starts. Apparently we're witnessing a mass exodus of happening folk to the countryside to chic houses, hip hotels and groovy seaside resorts.

We arrive at Babington, the world's premier interface of town and country, and a beautiful Georgian house and members' only hotel in Somerset, filled with contemporary furniture,

newspapers, glossy magazines, pregnant heifer-sized baths, and writing paper as glossy and thick as laminated sheets. The sun is beating down. There even seem to be sisal and woodchip paths for those silly enough to venture a country walk.

But no. Where the chips are down, they lead to a shop selling frocks (think Allegra Hicks) and The Cowshed – where our children

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(aged 9 and 11) go to Barbie heaven having French pedicures; and we opt not for Hopi ear candling but for massages with products with names like Dirty Cow, Frisky Cow and Saucy Cow. Is this what they do with edible animals in the countryside?

We could have spent all day watching chick flicks from the bath and drinking proper coffee while guests guzzle brownies, ice-cream and bubbly in the private cinema. And eating superlative dressed crab salad and hedgerow of organic leaves while Pino, the ever-attentive waiter, sends a taxi to fetch me wheat-free bread – although I forgot to ask for seaweed tablets.

But no, BJ rallies the troops for an al fresco cycle ride past stones bearing names like Norfolk Royal (for sitting on) and signposts with hands pointing in all directions, including the sky.

At lunch there's a guest (genus: colour supplement art director) in stripy pyjama bottoms and lime, yellow and red trainers, drinking smoothies. And City traders (wide boys with tattoos and shades as big as Posh's) eating burgers. And single women in PR wearing Indian smocks, drinking Rosé and reading their stars to one another.

There are yummy mummies in gold slip-ons, pashminas, oversized glittery bags and floral frocks – showing more breast than you see in a dairy. Urban warrior husbands who sport little pots, Lacoste shirts, Ray Bans and drink G&Ts. Hordes of children called Imogen, Amos, Iago and Pesto in baby Ralph Lauren. And, being treated like newspaper barons, size zero dogs – boasting personal Babington canine beds, towels and poop bags.

The really beautiful people aren't here – the Madonnas and Liz Hurleys of this world have their own cutting-edge piles. It's dominated by media and fashion types; women who've read the magazines and copied The Look – but don't realise that real Notting Hillbillies do Converse and jeans out of town... more urbe than rus, it gets my vote.

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