

House&Home

Second-home wars

The coronavirus crisis is straining an already fractious relationship between locals and owners of holiday properties. By *Liz Rowlinson*

A month ago, Alice from Haslemere, Surrey, was getting ready to drive to her holiday home in Cornwall, a five-bedroom property in Padstow, to prepare it for the busy summer season. It was just before March 23, the date the UK went into lockdown to slow the spread of coronavirus. But after a call to her Padstow neighbour, another second-home owner who was already there and self-isolating, she changed her mind, fearful of the welcome she might receive.

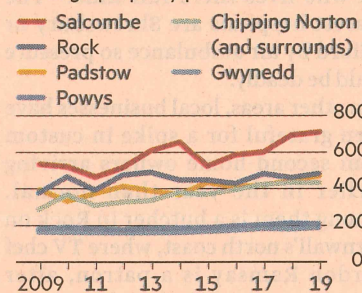
Alice, not her real name, says her neighbour, a scientist, had suspected a lockdown was looming and was already taking precautions against a possible backlash from locals. "She keeps her car off the street in fear of [malicious] damage, and goes for walks late in the day to keep her head down."

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, tensions have increased in communities across the UK where there is a high proportion of second homes, including the West Country, the Cotswolds, Scotland and Wales. Some blame those waiting out lockdown in their second homes for bringing the virus, infecting the local population and putting additional pressure on local medical services.

An app developed at King's College London, with the start-up Zoe Global and others, tracks self-reported Covid-19 symptoms across the UK. After the lockdown was imposed, it found that second-home hotspots had higher incidences of the virus than surrounding areas, fuelling concern that second-homers could be spreading it.

Prices climb in second-home hotspots

Average property price (£ '000)

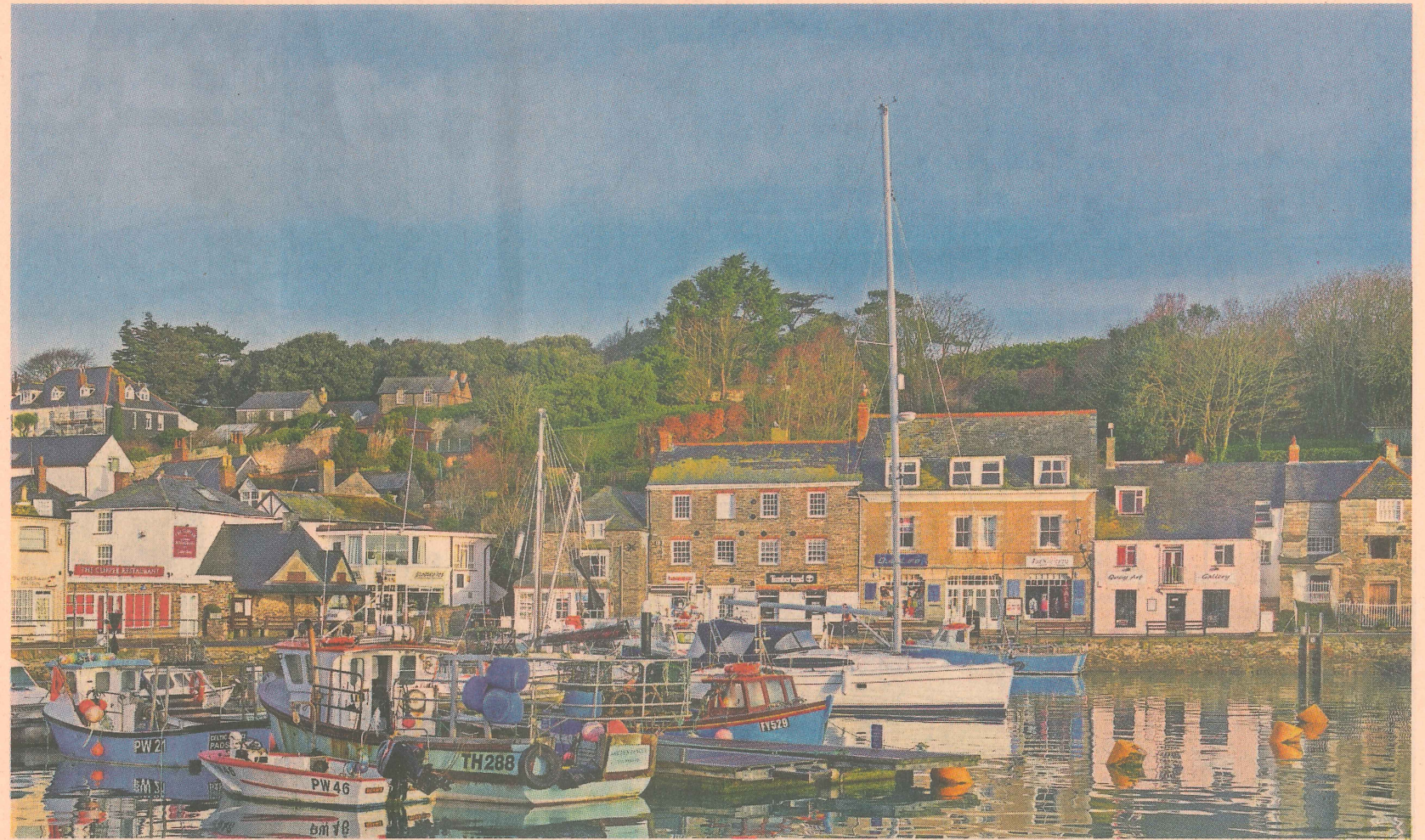


Sources: Hamptons International; Land Registry

In the past two weeks, the higher rates of infection in some holiday-home hotspots have begun to die down. "This is speculation," says Dr Tim Spector, lead researcher, "but the reduction might be explained by Londoners moving to second homes, reporting symptoms, then staying in lockdown. Only if they went wild and spread it around would you see these areas as staying higher."

If he is right, many second-home owners are respecting social-distancing measures in their host communities. But the crisis is straining an already fractious relationship. Many blame second-homers for driving up house prices in their areas and increasing their local economies' reliance on tourism. At the same time, many businesses have become dependent on high-spending tourists and second-home owners.

In 2019, the average property price in the town of Salcombe in Devon was



Padstow, Cornwall, one of the communities in the UK where there is a high proportion of second homes — Alamy



Not the warm welcome that might be hoped for — Rex Shutterstock

nearly £706,840, according to Hamptons International, up 33 per cent in the past 10 years. Over the same time, average prices in the Cotswolds market town of Chipping Norton have risen 52 per cent to £427,740. In Padstow, a fishing village on the Cornish coast, prices have jumped 29 per cent in the past five years

to an average of £466,540. In nearby Rock, the average is £477,940 — about £6,000 more expensive than London's.

In some areas, bitter feelings have worsened with the accusation that some second-home owners have been exploiting a loophole to claim grants from the government. Councillor Judy Pearce,

'Visitors are careless with exercise and in shops'

Rural communities have been left "frustrated" and "in despair" by second-home owners and short-term letters travelling to their areas despite the UK lockdown, according to one resident of a north Wales beauty spot. Visitors have been doing so despite calls by authorities to stay at home.

"It is encroaching on our lives, and possibly spreading the virus," she says. "Wales has a high number of cases, even with our sparse population. The visitors are careless with daily exercise and in shops." The resident, who is living with a long-term health

condition and did not want to be named, says her neighbouring house, a holiday let, is owned by landlords from England. She says the house was let to holidaymakers over the Easter break, who invited visitors for the day, in defiance of lockdown measures introduced on March 23.

"We were staying in, but we could hear them having an Easter egg hunt in the holiday let. Many times guests arrived, with families and children joining them for the day. It was exasperating."

Helen Barrett

leader of South Hams District Council, in Devon, says locals are fed up with owners who say their second homes are available for rent for 140 nights a year just to avoid paying council tax, and who may now be entitled to up to £10,000 each under the emergency small business grants fund, which was intended to

help small businesses through the coronavirus crisis.

Meanwhile, struggling local small traders who do not have premises and pay business rates cannot apply for a grant. "A certain coterie of owners who

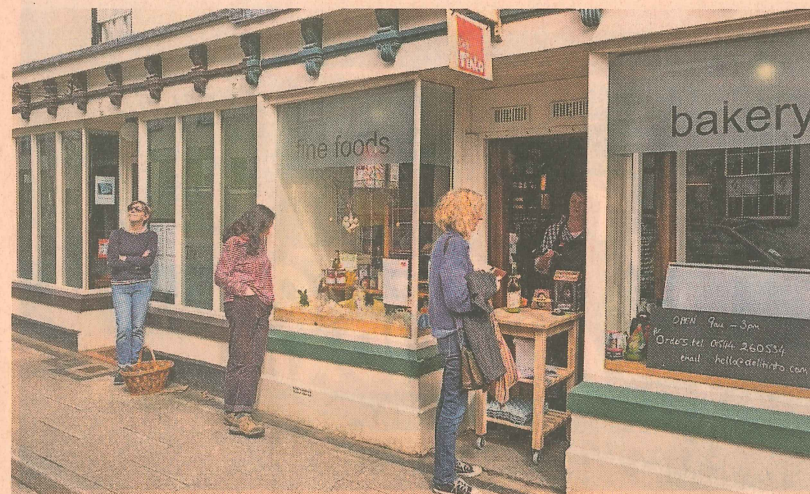
Continued on page 4



A village in the aspirational Cotswolds region during the recent Easter holiday — AFP via Getty Images



Upmarket Daylesford Organic Farmshop in the Cotswolds — Martin Morrell



Respectful social distancing in Presteigne, Powys, Wales — Alamy

Second-home wars

Continued from page 3

have a sense of entitlement will always get up the noses of local people but this grant is a huge issue," Pearce says.

Could the pandemic spell the end of the social acceptability of owning a second home in the UK? Many think not. Estate agents are keen to point out what they see as the upsides to living in areas

with high numbers of second homes. "Locals also benefit from the arrival of businesses — such as Daylesford Organic [a farm shop in Kingham] — that are the result of the Cotswolds becoming more aspirational for second-home owners," says Harry Gladwin of The Buying Solution, a property consul-

tancy. "For locals, it's a case of 'can't live with them, can't live without them,'" says Chris Clifford of Savills in Cornwall.

Some locals do not want them at all. Between 1979 and 1994, the Welsh nationalist group Meibion Glyndwr set fire to 228 English-owned second homes in Powys, Wales. Despite that, the area



remains popular with second-home owners. But tensions have resurfaced, says Angela Steatham from Llanrhaeadr Ym Mochnant, in north Powys.

"There is anger that people have snuck into their holiday homes and helped the local shop run out of essentials, or are competing for supermarket delivery slots," says Steatham, an organisational development consultant who lives there full-time. "The nearest hospitals are Shrewsbury or Telford by air ambulance so pressure could be deadly."

In other areas, local businesses have been grateful for a spike in custom from second-home owners arriving earlier in the year than normal. Among them is a butcher in Rock on Cornwall's north coast, where TV chef Gordon Ramsay is a patron, after choosing to spend the lockdown in his home nearby. "Some of the second-home owners invest a lot of time and money here," says Clifford.

According to data from Savills, the area around Rock, Trebetherick and Polzeath has the highest concentration of second homes in Cornwall — 42 per cent of properties. However, according to Robin, who lives in

'Local businesses need the custom from second-home owners who employ gardeners and cleaners'

nearby Constantine Bay, most have not arrived this year.

Robin, who did not want to give his surname, says there is usually an amicable relationship between locals and second-home owners, but now there is a fear that the infrastructure cannot cope with an influx of Covid-19 cases,

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According to Savills, there are 301,810 second homes in the UK, not including buy-to-let properties.

The local authorities with the highest ratio of second homes include: the City of London (26.5 per cent); North Norfolk (9.9 per cent); Isles of Scilly (8.6 per cent); Gwynedd (8.4 per cent); South Hams (8.3 per cent) and South Lakeland (7.2 per cent).

Second-home hotspots tend to be more unaffordable than their surrounding areas. Median house prices in the Cotswolds, South Hams and North Norfolk are all more than 10 times local median wages — the average across England and Wales is 7.83 times local median wages.

as there is only one major hospital in Cornwall, in Truro.

There are examples of charity, too. The Wadebridge Foodbank is one of the recipients of more than £100,000 raised by a second-home owner scheme where households are asked to donate a week's rental income as part of the Cornwall Community Foundation. In Salcombe, Devon, second-home owners are discussing a whipround for the local pub and boat businesses, says Giles, from Epsom, Surrey.

The 73-year-old did not go to his second home, as he has done every Easter for 20 years. "But local businesses need the custom from owners who employ gardeners and cleaners. I have just paid £1,000 in harbour dues for a boat I won't be using, but am not going to ask for it back."

While animosity may be increasing in some places, local estate agents do not believe the crisis will have a long-term impact on the holiday-home market.

The taste for remote working in a coastal home might even be another legacy of the pandemic, suggests Jonathan Cunliffe, an agent based in Falmouth. "After 9/11 there was a property boom in areas such as the south-west, as people wanted to escape cities," he says.

But a global recession may put paid to that. "I am sure there will be some needing to offload a second home after losing their job or business," he says.

Meanwhile, Alice is intending to sell her holiday home in Padstow. She wants to move to the Cotswolds, where she hopes she will be more welcome.