

# Time and place

## Ben Miller

In 1993, I lived in a shared house above an antiquarian bookshop in Calabria Road, Highbury, north London, with the playwright Jez Butterworth and his brothers and sisters. That's where I met Alexander Armstrong.

The owner of the house was quite elderly, didn't live in London and, joy of joys, had been letting the house out for so long, he had no idea how high rents were. We paid a peppercorn amount, and that's how we were all able to live there. Houses like that are passed down by word of mouth. There was only a kitchen, and everything else was used as a bedroom — there were five in total.

The room that I moved into was hilarious — it was exactly the same size as the bed. It was so small, I couldn't see how I would get anything in it. So I had another bed made with really long legs. It was raised about 3ft off the floor and I could put my things underneath.

The house was a real drop-in place. We were always playing Monopoly and drinking a lot. I generally seemed to win, though I am not sure how. One night, some gravel was thrown at my window. Outside was Andy Parsons [now a stand-up comedian], asking if I wanted to go for a beer.

At the time, I'd just done a one-man show called *Gone with Noakes*, about the Blue Peter presenter John Noakes, which had been a big hit at the Fringe. Alexander was living on this barge in Chiswick, so we went round and had the most fantastic evening. Alexander is a brilliant cook. He'd chop up vegetables such as parsnips and carrots, then roast them in the pan — in those days you had no right to roast vegetables, so he was very much in the vanguard. Then we got drunk, and he played the piano and we sang *Pennies from Heaven*. I remember thinking, it doesn't get any better than this.

We worked in sketch clubs all over London, and sometimes we'd go down to Brighton. We were honing our craft.

A lot of it is perseverance. Then we wrote a sketch together called *The Great Escape*, about two upper-class types tied to a chair. One has incredibly inventive ways to escape, but they can't, because they are tied to a chair.

In a way, it was a prototype of the *Chav Pilots*, a sketch in *The Armstrong and Miller Show*. It was our first sketch that really, properly worked. A producer saw it, then it was serialised on Radio 4's *Loose Ends* and we became regulars there. It was an exciting moment.

Then, in 1996, we went to Edinburgh and got nominated for a Perrier award. Once we had that, Paramount Comedy Channel contacted us, and we did the first series of *Armstrong and Miller* with them, then another three with Channel Four.

My dad loved comedy, and we always watched it: *Hancock*, *The Young Ones* and *Fawlty Towers*. He was a lecturer in American literature and my mum was an English teacher. They were both really good critics — they could really take a joke or sketch apart, which is very helpful when you're learning.

I stayed in that Highbury house for about five years. I had moved up from the smallest room to the best room, at the top of the house. But it was time to move on. My sister had moved in and there was a younger group of people. I had become the mad relative in the attic. In 1997, I moved out and bought a flat in Canonbury. Alexander moved into a house around the corner.

The great thing about a shared house is that you are around people who also want to do something with their lives. It can spur you on. It's hard to do something like that alone. It was a great environment to be in.

Interview by Nicola Venning

■ Ben Miller stars in *What We Did on Our Holiday*, which is in cinemas now



I could barely fit a bed into my bedroom, but my north London housemate taught me to see the funny side of life — it's where I met Alexander Armstrong



ALEXANDRA GOSS

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# Moving on



**SUNDAY TIMES SPOTIFY**  
Visit [spoti.fi/miller](http://spoti.fi/miller) to hear Ben Miller's favourite nostalgic tracks. Not on Spotify yet? Go to [thesundaytimes.co.uk/playlists](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/playlists)

The comedian and actor Ben Miller, 48, recalls sharing a house in Highbury in the 1990s



Chain free Cavendish and Todd have done up a villa near the sights of Florence



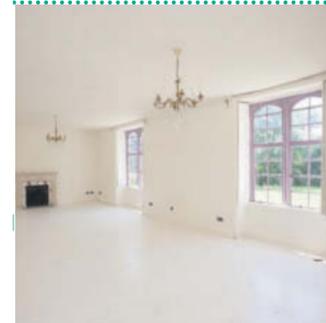
## Cav gets on his bike

The Isle of Man is renowned for its high rainfall, so it's little wonder that the Manx cycling star **Mark Cavendish** has bought a place in the sun. The champion sprinter, who has won 25 Tour de France stages, has just finished renovating the villa near Florence that he purchased a couple of years ago for an undisclosed sum; Cavendish, 29, has trained on the hills of Tuscany for many years. He, his wife, Peta Todd, and their two children will split their time between the five-bedroom Italian retreat and their homes in Essex and the Isle of Man.

The Manx Missile selected many of the finishes himself, from the contemporary Italian interiors to the Quick-Step hardwood flooring, the state-of-the-art home entertainment set and the laundry chute, which will allow him to send his sweaty training gear straight down to the basement. "The weather in the Isle of Man is not really great for long hours in the saddle, but the climate and terrain of Tuscany are perfect for riding for hours a day," he says.

## Roman holiday home

You can see why **Roman Polanski** picked *Chalet Biester*, in the historic Portuguese town of Sintra, as the set for his 1999 thriller *The Ninth Gate*, with **Johnny Depp** as a rare-book dealer who becomes involved in a supernatural conspiracy. The 15-bedroom pile, which dates from the late 19th century, is a striking mix of neogothic and neoromanesque, with elaborate friezes in the vast rooms and a chapel with a window onto the sea. It's on the market for €30m (£23.7m). 00 35 1 214 643 636, [fineandcountry.com.pt](http://fineandcountry.com.pt)



## Lowe goes lower

**Pearl Lowe** has finally found a buyer for her Somerset retreat. The singer turned designer put the Old Rectory, near Shepton Mallet, on the market last year for £1.4m. After a sale fell through, Lowe, 44, lowered the price of the Jacobean pile, which has several outbuildings and paddocks in its 3.17 acres, to £1.25m this August, then again to £1.15m before accepting an offer earlier this month. "I'm delighted that a lovely friend from London is buying it. I know they'll be happy living in Somerset," she says. Despite the cut, Lowe and her husband, the Supergrass drummer **Danny Coffey**, 40, will make a tidy profit on the five-bedder, which they bought for £800,000 in March 2013.



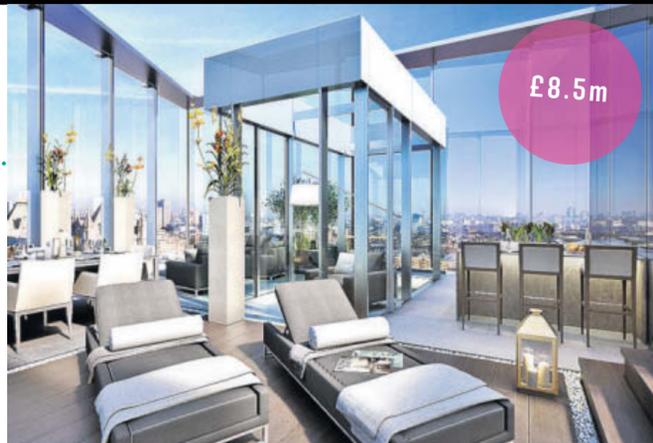
Pearl drops The designer had to trim the price of her Somerset rectory



## Director's seat

Until 2012, grade II listed Old Friars, on Richmond Green, in southwest London, was home to the late **Richard Attenborough**. The revered actor and director, who won two Oscars for *Gandhi*, bought the eight-bedroom house with his wife, Sheila Sim, in 1949, and installed a projection room and editing suite at the bottom of the garden. Here, Lord Attenborough showed many of his films to notable celebrities; he also added an office, known as *Beaver Lodge*, in which he and his employees worked. Lord and Lady Attenborough sold the property for £11.5m in 2012, and it is now back on the market for £12.75m. The new owner will need to embark on renovations. 020 8940 1575, [featherstoneleigh.co.uk](http://featherstoneleigh.co.uk)

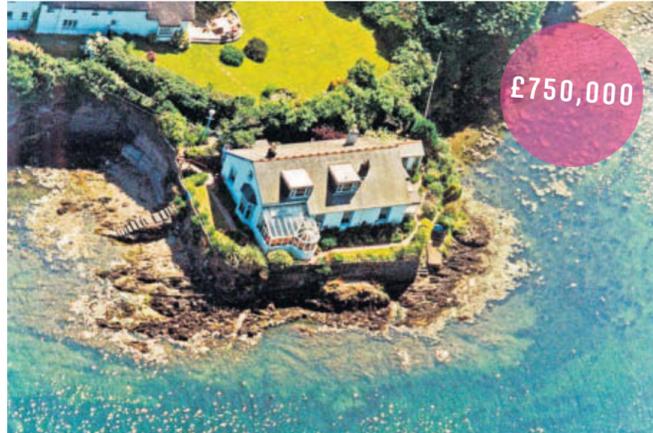
Prime location Richard Attenborough, pictured below in *The Great Escape*, owned Old Friars for more than 60 years



£8.5m

## TRIPLEX OF THE WEEK

Duplexes are so passé. The 14 flats in the Tower — the newly launched phase of Berkeley Homes's One Tower Bridge, right next to the London landmark — will include an ultraglam triplex penthouse with three ensuite bedrooms, a glass-walled sky lounge and a roof terrace with a hot tub. The 21-storey building has a pool, a spa and a business centre, if you can tear yourself away from the jaw-dropping views of the Thames and the City. 020 7871 0011, [onetowerbridge.co.uk](http://onetowerbridge.co.uk); 020 7861 5499, [knightfrank.co.uk](http://knightfrank.co.uk)



£750,000

## LOCATION OF THE WEEK

It's in one of Cornwall's most striking spots — and it's for sale for the first time in 50 years. On a promontory, with Gillan Creek on three sides, the seven-bedroom house was built in the 1900s and gives you a sense that you're floating on the water, not just beside it, with views of the Church of St Anthony and the sea beyond. Private steps lead down to the foreshore, and the property has a large section of waterfront land upstream, a grassy spit and woodland. Helston is a 20-minute drive away. 01872 273473, [waterfrontandcountryhomes.com](http://waterfrontandcountryhomes.com)



£390,000

## CONVERSION OF THE WEEK

For first impressions, it would be hard to top Flete House, a grade I listed Elizabethan manor near Modbury, Devon. It's set in 12 acres, with a tennis court, an Italianate garden full of roses, statuary and ancient trees, and parkland walks down to Mothecombe beach; in the library, you'll find stained glass by Edward Burne-Jones. Although this — and many of the other grand receptions — are communal, the owner of Apartment 1 (one of 29 homes) will have two bedrooms, a sitting room with mullioned windows and a garden. 01548 831163, [marchandpetit.co.uk](http://marchandpetit.co.uk)

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