

# Time and place

## Ben Okri

I moved to Linden Gardens, in Notting Hill Gate, in 1988, when I was in my late twenties. I had a whole top-floor flat to myself. I brought the first draft of *The Famished Road* with me and that flat was where I began rewriting it. In that sense it is a very important place in my memory. It was the first time I felt I could write comfortably and think clearly. I had been at the stumps, as it were, for such a long time.

I came to England from Nigeria in 1978, and then went to university [in Essex]. After a brief homeless period, I got a flat in London and wrote my way to some form of modest stability – I was writing short stories. I moved a lot. Rent in London is very high and quite difficult for a very young person. I stayed in a lot of rented accommodation.

This flat was spacious and quiet. I rented it from a good friend, Margaret Busby, a lovely lady [and Britain's first black female publisher]. Something about my writing changed round about that time. I acquired a kind of tranquillity. I had been striving for something in my tone of voice as a writer – it was there that it finally came together.

I would write in the morning, write in the afternoon and write in the evening. I just seemed to be writing all day until I was exhausted and my brain was shrivelling. Almost every day. It was like penal solitude. It was endless. In the evenings I would go for a long walk as a way of decongesting my brain.

That flat is also where I wrote the short stories that became *Stars of the New Curfew*. I wrote for different newspapers and was something of an activist, involved in poetry and politics in Nigeria and over here.

Around that time I got to know Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi and various playwrights. It was a very rich period of black literary life with the International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books. Notting Hill was vibrant and multicultural and had a great mix of people from all around the world. It had a wonderful energy – it seemed to represent the zeitgeist.



Visitors included my mum, friends from Nigeria and fellow poets, who would stay on my floor or on my sofa. One of my neighbours was Julie Christie. I would meet her occasionally in a beautiful little bookshop nearby, which has now shut. That's one of the sadnesses of London – all the independent bookshops have gone.

I wrote in a little room at the front of the flat. Everything was handwritten and I had a manual typewriter. I often drew to help me clarify something. I generally preferred my walls bare, though I had books all around my table – everywhere was cluttered with books. It would seem complete chaos to anyone else, but to me everything was in its place. I was writing poetry, prose essays and novels.

My writing room now is just as chaotic. I can't think of a writing room that is not chaotic. There is a strange relationship between place and creativity. Of course, you can be creative anywhere. But some places are especially contagious. Cramped spaces cramp the growth of ideas, and lead to coiled writing. Virginia Woolf is completely right in her essay, *A Room of One's Own*, which was written about the relationship between a woman's writing and liberty [in which she argues that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction]. But it is actually true of everybody.

I was in Linden Gardens for about three years. Margaret needed to re-let the place and I had to move on – I'm now living in Little Venice. But it was long enough. *The Famished Road* was almost done. I left in late 1990. And the following year, I won the Booker.

Interview by Nicola Venning

Ben Okri was interviewed as part of the *Latitude Festival*. His new novel, *The Age of Magic*, is published in the autumn



ALEXANDRA GOSS

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# Moving on



Pearl Lowe, pictured with her daughter Daisy, has cut the price of her house. Is the wind turbine to blame?



## Wind in the sale

Pearl Lowe is now seeking lower offers for her Somerset pile. The singer turned designer was flogging the five-bedroom Old Rectory, near Bruton, for £1.4m last year and, after a sale fell through, has relaunched it at £1.25m. There is a snag, however: an 80-metre wind turbine has been installed nearby. "We love wind turbines, but they are a bit like Marmite," says Lowe, 44. "You can't see it from the house – only from the drive – and you don't ever hear a sound." The power company has offered to run a line to the property to provide free electricity.

Lowe and her husband, the Supergrass drummer Danny Goffey, bought the Jacobean home, set in more than three acres, for £890,000 in March 2013, according to the Land Registry. They spent six months renovating it and installed a party barn with a minstrel's gallery. "We had my husband's 40th there in February," Lowe says. "It was legendary." Guests included the actor Rhys Ifans, who made a speech. [struttandparker.com](http://struttandparker.com)

## Ready for a close-up

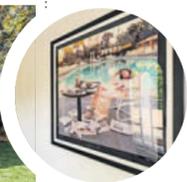
Removal vans are booked at Little Grays Farm, the grade II listed Kent home of the edgy fashion photographer Perou. The snapper – who has shot everyone from Dita Von Teese to Daniel Radcliffe, and recently launched *Edict* magazine – accepted an offer of £1.5m from a London family looking to buy in the country. The new owners will certainly get bucolic bliss – the five-bedder comes with outbuildings, a pool and 10 acres. Perou, his wife, Lucy, and their two young sons are buying something smaller nearby.



Jamie Oliver first found fame at this house in Clerkenwell, where he lived with his wife, Jools

## A pukka pad

Fans of cookery shows will recognise this house in Clerkenwell, east London, as the one in which Jamie Oliver first launched his television career with *The Naked Chef*. Oliver, now 39, lived in the property in 1999 with his now wife, Jools; he would slide down the spiral staircase in the opening credits of the BBC series and ride off on his moped from the cobbled street outside. The home, which has three bedrooms and is now for sale at £2.995m, has been significantly updated since it was used to propel Oliver to stardom. It now includes fibreoptic mood lighting and an ensuite spa bathroom with a plasma screen. The kitchen, though refurbished, is in the same place as when Oliver cooked his pukka tukka there. [stirlingackroyd.com](http://stirlingackroyd.com)



Faye Dunaway no longer needs four bedrooms

## Bonnie's bolt hole

It is not hard to tell that Faye Dunaway owns this sleek four-bedroom pad in West Hollywood – in the hallway is the famous photograph of the actress sitting poolside at the Beverly Hills Hotel surrounded by newspapers, taken by Terry O'Neill in 1977, the morning after Dunaway won an Oscar for her role in *Network*. The Bonnie and Clyde star, 73, has owned the 1920s property for more than 15 years, and is now selling up for \$1.75m (£1m). "I have now approached a time in my life where I don't need something so spacious," she says. "I renovated my home in a way that would keep its antique quality and charm while adding a more modern feel. I especially love how the contemporary tiles and light fixtures complement the older aspects such as the crown mouldings and windows. Hopefully someone will find the same joy and comfort this property has brought me." [savills.com](http://savills.com)



£1.875m  
0/0

## MANOR HOUSE OF THE WEEK

Its mullioned, leaded windows now glow with state-of-the-art lighting, not flickering candlelight, and its original wood-panelled walls are inset with widescreen televisions, but after a recent renovation by its owners, Burton Hall is as impressive today as it must have been to the peasants when it was built in the late 16th century. On the market for only the second time in a century, the grade II\* listed five-bedroom house, near the Cheshire village of Tarporley, is set in 1½ acres, with a lake that has a small deck. **01244 328361, jackson-stops.co.uk**



£750,000

## PROJECT OF THE WEEK

In the ownership of the Ponsonby family since the 13th century, Haile Hall sits in wild Cumbrian countryside, its aura of romantic beauty unchanged. The partly renovated, grade II\* listed 10-bedroom home, which once housed important military collections, is in the village of Haile, just beyond the Lake District, and comes with two-bedroom Gatehouse Cottage, some barns, and more than five acres. Although English Heritage will need to be consulted, plans have been drawn up to subdivide the home and outbuildings. **01228 546400, smithsgore.co.uk**



£295,000

## SEASIDE HOME OF THE WEEK

What the Old Custom House lacks in size – it has just 441 sq ft of living space and one bedroom – it makes up for in character. One of Aldeburgh's most iconic homes, thought to date from the 18th century, its ground floor was once used to store seized contraband passing through this seaside Suffolk town. The interiors are in need of some TLC, but it's in a great spot: just a short walk from the shingle beach, boutiques and restaurants. **01728 454505, bedfords.co.uk**

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After I arrived from Nigeria, I was lost for 10 years. But then I found a room of my own in multicultural Notting Hill, and discovered my writer's voice