

Best Places to Live

HELEN DAVIES
Property Editor

Never has where we live been so important. The pandemic has proved how much we value our homes, and what a difference where we live can make to our health and happiness.

In 2021 an aspirational address is one that offers great houses and, for some, top schools, but also one where there is a supportive community, where practical conveniences are well catered for locally, and where there is easy access to mind-expanding, lung-filling countryside, or a secret wild swimming spot or a great park with a pond.

It is no wonder many of us are reassessing our priorities and thinking hard about where we want to live. We are here to help.

We won't pretend it's been easy to compile the guide this year. Covid restrictions have been in place. Our priorities have been community, countryside and convenience.

We've learnt that anything from a sociable dog walk to a secret wild swimming spot or fresh veg from the farmers' market can add hugely to one's overall quality of life. The small acts of kindness on display in so many of the locations on our list are humbling and inspiring.

The basics are important too. We looked at schools and connections by car, train, Tube or train. We checked for Air Quality Management Areas, and the UK's leading independent broadband guide, Thinkbroadband.com, detailed what's on offer in every one of our 78 locations. A breakdown of house prices was also supplied by the data specialist TwentyCI, so you'll know what you need to pay whatever your stage of life.

As we begin to emerge from this lockdown and start plotting a course to a positive post-pandemic future, this is your chance to celebrate where you live — or plan a move to one of our Best Places to Live.



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AND THE WINNER IS... STROUD

Lively, local and fiercely independent, this town's community spirit made it our top pick

Saturday morning in Stroud is always a spectacle, and last weekend was no exception. Families queued at stalls selling doughnuts, the smell of that food filled the air and a woman strolled past carrying a large piece of cardboard bearing the words "stop racism". In every direction beautiful wooded hills appeared through gaps between buildings, while on the restored canal a dog in a life jacket floated past on a paddleboard.

"There are all sorts of things going on here, but everyone has the one aim of keeping Stroud independent and local," says Dominic Salter, a Stroudie for 30 years who is typical of this former industrial town, where adaptability, innovation and pride are the norm. Salter is one of the bosses of Salt Bakehouse, which responded to the pandemic by delivering its bread and pastries by ebike and converting a van into a mobile shop to tour the surrounding villages.

Stroud is lively, local and independent — three of the best things a town can be — but it also has the basics covered in style. The schools are excellent, the transport links good and the surrounding Cotswold countryside is delightfully verdant. Stride out in any direction and you'll find yourself somewhere stunning, ideally on one of the commons — Minchinhampton, Rodborough or Selsley — where you can gaze in wonder at the views across the Severn Vale and into Wales.

"It's so beautiful," says the novelist Jilly Cooper, who has lived here for nearly 40 years. "These incredible valleys are carpeted with green grass, often with a stream at the bottom and mighty trees higher up. The stone of the houses is like a mirror: grey on grey days, shiny when the sun's out and glowing red at sunset. It's great dog-walking country and everyone gets on with everyone else."

It is just such a friendly spirit that attracted Dale Vince, a new-age traveller turned green energy pioneer and owner of Ecotricity. Stroud is "an original town quite unlike anywhere I've been", he says. "The people are brilliant and there's a real creative and alternative scene. And I really like the fact that it's an industrial, working town surrounded by all this lush countryside."

As well as owning Ecotricity, the town's biggest employer, he's chairman of the vegan football team Forest Green Rovers, just down the road in Nailsworth. Their bright green shirts are a perfect symbol of the eco-tinged unconventionality that's a big part of Stroud's charm. Extinction Rebellion was founded here, as well as Britain's first organic café, and you're never far from an impromptu protest among the vintage and vinyl shops.

The high street lacks polish but is improving; there's local produce everywhere. And the newly revamped Five Valleys shopping centre has an on-trend "artisan market", soon to be joined by a branch of the boutique department store Sandersons — an impressive show of faith in today's retail climate.

If there's a hippy-vibe and beanie-vibe in town, it's all muddy riding boots and well-worn Barbour's in surrounding villages such as Frampton Mansell and Chalford, where the shop sells organic venison and shampoo refills.

What brings everyone together is the Sunday farmers' market. With 50 stalls, it's one of the best in the UK. Currently essentials only, it's still thriving even without the tourists and arts and crafts thanks to expert social distancing, judicious road closures and the love shown by locals — many of whom use it for their weekly shop. There's also the Jolly Nice farm shop just outside Stroud, where you can be assured food miles are low. Ingeniously, it has turned itself into a drive-through during lockdown.

The pandemic has, according to Emma Taylor, who lives with her seven-year-old daughter, Flo, in the Slad Valley, reminded people how lucky they are. "It's such a beautiful place to live and everyone found amazing places to walk locally that they didn't know about." Taylor is one of Stroud's many Covid volunteers, making facemasks, chatting with neighbours and helping with shopping. "There's a good community in Stroud and we've been very supportive of each other. It's brought out a lot of kindness and helped people realise they're not on their own."

It's hardly a surprise that these riches have caught the eye of city dwellers reassessing their priorities after 12 months of confinement in domestic barracks.



Below: Stroudies Lizzie, Luca and Paul Watson. Right: the baker Dominic Salter at his farmers' market stall



Below: a view of Stroud from Selsley Common. Right: a Georgian four-bedroom house on New Street on sale with Murrays for £695,000. Far right: a farmhouse with nine bedrooms on Wick Street on sale for £3 million via Carter Jonas



James Murray of Murrays estate agency, one of 19 in Stroud, says that in 2020 the business had its busiest year ever: "Everyone's after extra space, especially somewhere with a garden for the kids and a home office or gym — or at least room to install one," he says.

The biggest problem is persuading Stroudies to move. "It's a real seller's market here. There's a serious lack of stock," says Gemma Goulding, manager of the Stroud branch of Hamptons International estate agency.

What everyone wants is a view and because of the hills most people get one, including Paul Watson and his wife, Lizzie. They got in before the rush, moving to Stroud from London four years ago to be close to her family and bring up their four-year-old son, Luca. Watson is a perfect example of the inventive, public-spirited folk who fit in here — although his career is anything but typical.

He describes himself as a "football activist" and has managed the Micronesia national team, worked with Rohingya refugees and organised a world cup for countries that are not recognised by Fifa.

"What's most interesting is the sense of identity here. Stroud has a fierce identity; it's somewhere that really punches above its weight," he says. "My work is quite underdog driven, usually pushing against the status quo, and it's brilliant to find that here, especially when we're surrounded by such lovely countryside."

Amenities range from Stroud Wetland Centre and Westonbirt Arboretum to Stratford Park, which has a leisure centre with indoor and outdoor pools. There are plenty of sports clubs; if you sign up for rugby at Minchinhampton you might get the odd coaching session by the former England captain Mike Tindall.

With no major venues, Stroud doesn't scream out cultural hotspot, but scratch the surface and there's plenty going on. The area is a hotbed for contemporary dance, there's an innovative film festival and there's always something at Stroud Valleys Artspace to fill up your calendar.

"There's something in the lay of the land that encourages people to do their own thing here — a real let's-do attitude," says Alex Howard, a leading

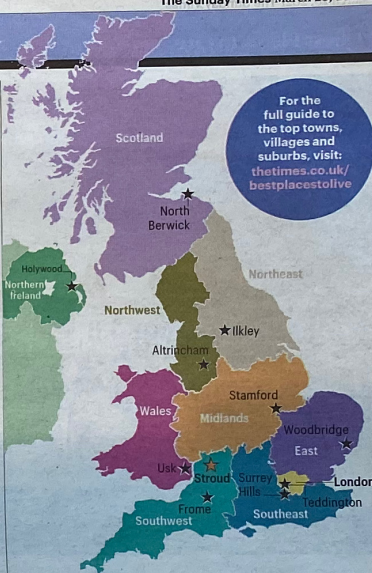
figure in contemporary dance who has lived in Stroud for 25 years.

And if you're just after a night out (when they're allowed again), you're guaranteed a good one at the Prince Albert, one of the country's best music pubs; the Sub Rooms, home of gigs and theatre; or the Stroud Brewery bar, where you can wash down a New Age Hippy vegan pizza (£11) with a pint of Big Cat stout — all organic and, as they say, "very Stroud".

You'll love living here if you like independent spirit in well-connected Cotswold countryside. **Best address** It's a contradiction of Stroud that many of the people who say they love it choose to live in a village on one of the commons rather than in the town itself. The most expensive and sought-after houses are in Rodborough (very much part of Stroud) and Minchinhampton (further out). **Median house price** £265,000 **Connections** There are direct trains to Cheltenham (from 35 minutes), Swindon (from 28 minutes) and London Paddington (from 1 hour 26 minutes). By car it's a 30-minute drive north to Cheltenham or Gloucester and 20 minutes west to the M5, then 35 minutes south to Bristol.

Broadband Central Stroud, ie near the River Frome and the Stroudwater Navigation canal, has a high number of slow spots — the town has good superfast coverage otherwise. Outlying villages have full fibre networks built by Gigaclear, so should have decent speeds. **Schools** The two selective grammars, Stroud High School (inspected in 2010) and Marling School (2013; both for ages 11 to 18), are rated outstanding by Ofsted. They feature in *The Sunday Times* Parent Power guide, as do Rodborough Community Primary School and Hopelands Preparatory School (from £2,200 per term).

Air quality No problems. **Don't miss** Walks on one of the commons. **What's the catch?** The radicalism can go too far: the Beacon, a community hub where locals have gathered to discuss the "health risks" of the 5G phone network, was criticised for its poster questioning the seriousness of the pandemic.



For the full guide to the top towns, villages and suburbs, visit thetimes.co.uk/bestplacetolive

OVERALL WINNER Stroud, Gloucestershire

EAST ★ Winner **Woodbridge**, Suffolk
Dedham Vale, Essex/Suffolk
Ely, Cambridgeshire
Epping, Essex
Norwich
Saffron Walden, Essex
Shotley Peninsula, Suffolk
Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk

SOUTHWEST ★ Winner **Frome**, Somerset
Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire
Bristol
Chagford, Devon
Kingsbridge, Devon
Lizard Peninsula, Cornwall
Swanage, Dorset
Tisbury and the Nadder Valley, Wiltshire
Topsham, Devon
Wadebridge, Cornwall

SOUTHWEST ★ Winner **Surrey Hills**
Amersham, Buckinghamshire
Chackham, Oxfordshire
Deal, Kent
Hambleton Valley, Buckinghamshire
Isle of Wight
Lewes, East Sussex
Petworth, West Sussex
Sevenoaks, Kent
Winchester, Hampshire

LONDON ★ Winner **Teddington**
Muswell Hill
Nunhead
Primrose Hill
Walthamstow
Winchmore Hill

NORTH & NORTHEAST ★ Winner **Ilkley**, West Yorkshire
Alnham, Northumberland
Barnard Castle, County Durham
Easingwold, North Yorkshire
Leeds
Masham, North Yorkshire

WALES ★ Winner **Uk**, Monmouthshire
Aberdyfi, Gwynedd
Cloddau Estuary, Pembrokeshire
Llandello and the Tywi Valley, Carmarthenshire
Narberth, Pembrokeshire
Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan

NORTHERN IRELAND ★ Winner **Holywood**, Co Down
Magherafelt, Co Londonderry
Strangford Lough, Co Down

Slathwaite, West Yorkshire
Todmorden, West Yorkshire
Tynemouth, Tyne and Wear
York

NORTHWEST ★ Winner **Altrincham**, Cheshire
Arnscliffe and Silverdale, Lancashire
Bollington, Cheshire
Kirkby Lonsdale, Cumbria
Knutsford, Cheshire
Liverpool
Manchester
Saddleworth, Greater Manchester
Manchester

MIDLANDS ★ Winner **Stamford**, Lincolnshire
Birmingham (Bournville and Strichley)
Church Stretton, Shropshire
Earlsdon, Coventry
Edale, Derbyshire
Ilmington, Warwickshire
Rutland
Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire

SCOTLAND ★ Winner **North Berwick**, East Lothian
Bearsden, East Dunbartonshire
Broughty Ferry, Dundee
Dennistoun, Glasgow
Dunkeld, Perth and Kinross
Isle of Eigg
Melrose, Borders
Portobello, Edinburgh