

in our experience

WE TOOK A RISK!

Life after 40 no longer has any certainties or rules about how we live our lives. There are only choices. In the first of an occasional series, we hear some fascinating stories of what's gone right... and wrong!

“My town and country life swap”

LIZ BESTIC writes what happened when she and her husband quit the town for a simpler, more creative life in a beautiful waterside home.

After years of discussing moving to the country, we found a cottage in an idyllic woodland setting on the banks of a river estuary. There was a studio where I could turn my passion for painting into something more commercial, and a private mooring so Jim would finally get his boat. Dreams turned into calculations. Selling the north London house that had been home to our son and daughter for nearly 20 years would enable us to buy the property and, as an investment, also a tiny flat in town to rent out. Jim could commute while he looked for a new job and, as a writer, my work was more portable.

A year later, the tumbledown cottage had been transformed into a chic beach-style house. Light flooded in through huge glass windows and as I looked out on the estuary and the river that run virtually past our door, I breathed a sigh of happiness.

Although the location was isolated, it was only a mile walk to the town. There



Liz reconnects with her inner townie

was a station with a connection to London and glorious English countryside right on our doorstep. I threw myself into country life, taking the dog for walks in fields and woods, writing for the regional newspaper and painting. We bought canoes and I learned to sail. We really did live our dream.

Over the next two years, family and friends came to stay. Then Jim managed to relocate to a new job in Cambridge and the end of his commuting seemed to mark a final severance from city life.

It was during our third winter that I realised how I felt about the different contact we now had with our children. We still spoke and emailed, but the casual spontaneity of popping round for supper or meeting my daughter for a coffee was replaced by a three-hour drive. Then there were the friends we'd made when our kids were all growing up together. They also came to stay, but there's a world of difference between organising a visit weeks in advance and an impromptu glass

Liz's idyllic view
and her studio
in the country



of wine in a local bar. We did make friends in Suffolk, but most new people we met were either older and usually retired, or much younger with growing families. In our mid-fifties, we fitted neither group and I discovered how lonely you can be even when you know a lot of people. The beauty of the Suffolk countryside that used to thrill me now left me with a sense of emptiness and loss I couldn't explain.

Meanwhile, Jim's work had become all-consuming, so he barely had time to think let alone go sailing, and I was finding it difficult to juggle writing for a living and staging exhibitions.

It was my daughter, visiting for a weekend, who noticed my melancholy mood and asked what was wrong. When I told her, she looked at me and said, 'Why not sell up and move back to live in the flat?' It seemed such a simple solution, but it also meant admitting the dream we'd nurtured for so long wasn't for us.

At first, neither Jim nor I dared talk about it, but then one evening I blurted out that I thought we'd made a mistake. Jim smiled and said he felt the same. Once we'd said it, the rest was easy. We sold the house and set about returning to London. The Suffolk sale enabled us to pay off the mortgage on the flat and buy a second property to rent, so we now have a pension pot for the future and no longer have to work flat out just to survive.

We love being back home in the city. Sometimes we think fondly about aspects of living in the country and miss the good friends we made, but we also relish being back with our family. We don't regret our country adventure – If we'd never tried, it would always have been a 'what if...' One thing we have learned is that location isn't everything – it's people that count.

"We created a new style of home.... without having to move"

SUE JOHNSON, 52, a management consultant, is married to Patrick, 52, a headhunter. They live in Muswell Hill, London, with their daughters, Emma, 16, and Chloe, 14.

We've lived in the same area for over 15 years and are very happy here, but our house, originally built in the 1930s, was rather dark with several small rooms. Like a lot of people who live in older style properties, we craved space and more light, but we didn't want to leave the area, and also contemporary designer houses like that come with a very substantial price tag.

It was when we discovered that we had subsidence at the back of the house we started thinking that, instead of just repairing the cracking walls we could take the opportunity to do something completely radical.

As our plans became more ambitious, we knew we'd need help so contacted an architect recommended

by a friend. He spent hours talking to us about how we lived our lives and how we use each room before drawing up plans for what was rapidly becoming an exciting dream project.

During the work, we put most things into storage and moved out to rent a friend's home nearby. We watched as the builders ripped apart our old home and transformed it into something much more modern and practical. They removed an old conservatory we never used and levelled the downstairs area that had been

different heights in places. Huge glass doors in the kitchen-cum-

sitting room now open

out onto the garden.

Transforming the shell the house was one thing but we soon realised our old furniture. We now have a huge squashy sofa taking up most of the

sitting area and whacky lighting. An interior designer suggested we use a muted palette of creams, blues and greens throughout the house and then add splashes of colour. I bought >>

Making the changes was definitely life-enhancing and rejuvenating



Sue's old house has been turned into a more modern home

