

# I WALK INTO A HOUSE AND KNOW IMMEDIATELY WHAT I WOULD DO TO IT

Lucy Alexander  
on living life by the  
minute, her latest  
project and why  
she's hooked on  
Thames Ditton

*Words PHILIPPA HENNESSY*



**B**uying and selling houses is second nature for Lucy Alexander who has been gracing our screens for over a decade as the presenter of BBC One's long-standing programme, *Homes Under the Hammer*. Sporting a pair of J Brand jeans and a slouchy, turquoise sweater which complements bright blue eyes, her cheerful and relaxed demeanour is in stark contrast to the queen of property who knows potential when she sees it. However, her husky voice is only too recognisable. Pulling in some two million viewers who, like me, love a bit of a nose and gawping at battered old houses, she's made it what it is today – quite brilliant daytime TV. And she knows just why. 'We've got the morning slot nailed – men love it, OAPs love it, college kids love it, young people love it. It's because you get to see the wreck and then the reveal.'

## 'WE WANT A FRESH START'

She and Martin Roberts, who she playfully refers to as her 'on-screen husband', may make a powerful duo but when you meet her real-life husband, ex-premier football league player Stewart Castledine, it's evident who the real partners in crime are. Bonded by a mutual passion for property, the couple met on a blind date 17 years ago – their first proper rendezvous was viewing a flat for Lucy to purchase – and subsequently they ramped up considerable mileage across London on their bicycles in pursuit of something suitable.

The relationship quickly moved on and the flat purchase never materialised; instead they jointly acquired a house in Teddington. Six months later, they tied the knot and along came two children, Kitty (now 12) and Leo (now 10). But disaster hit their close family unit five years ago when, in a cruel turn of events, Kitty was struck down by a rare neurological disease that, within an hour, left her paralysed and in a wheelchair. At the forefront of their minds is making life as easy as possible for Kitty who is, she stresses, very able in her wheelchair. Hence their new project. Was this the reason for selling the Manor House, a secluded Georgian property tucked away from the high street in the idyllic village of Thames Ditton? 'We stumbled across the Manor unintentionally and fell in love with it but, not only are we considering Kitty's needs, we want to move on – we put everything into that house and couldn't take it any further. We want a fresh start,' she answers unwaveringly.

Moving away was not an option for Lucy. 'Everyone knows us here – the community rallied

around when we were at our lowest ebb. There's everything on our doorstep and the new house is a stone's throw from the kids' school and closer to the shops. I could talk about Thames Ditton forever,' she says animatedly. 'We have no desire to leave the village – this is our home and we're settled here.'

Unveiling the plans for new home which was not an auction purchase, she tells me, 'Despite it being an amazing way to buy a house' you can see why her producers often have to drag her off the set. 'I fall in love with a lot of the properties we work with,' she laughs. 'You can turn any house into what you want. You have to be clever though and have an experienced architect on board who can deliver what you ask for. Our wish list was rather contorted, yet we have everything that was on it.' Pulling in different trades and managing the project together, I wonder how the husband-wife working relationship is panning out. 'Stewart's the pragmatic one but we have similar tastes and are usually on the same wavelength – we're pretty compatible,' she concedes. 'I err on the side of traditional but with a twist and an element of fun, such as the odd statement piece of bold coloured furniture or a quirky piece of art. He's choosing the paint – all shades of grey – 50 of them,' she giggles at the innuendo and in jest, adds: 'I trust him not to mess up.' She elaborates on some of the features they are incorporating into the Georgian period property: 'The cross windows will be replaced with deep, heavy sash windows, there will be folding glass doors,



shutters, dark wood floors, walk-in wardrobes and level access for Kitty, as well as a therapy room for her. She has,' Lucy points out, 'designed her own room with a feature wall of faux-brick panels behind her bed. We want her room to be a place in which she can be totally independent. It's important to get it right, whether it's a lift for Kitty, a separate study for Stewart and I or a space for Leo's Xbox and table football,' she emphasises.



## 'I LIVE BY THE MINUTE'

I wonder how she achieves a good work-life-family balance. 'My life is crazy and I live by the minute but it's important to find some kind of equilibrium which is easier said than done. I'm incredibly committed to Hammer – it's my me-time – I have new ideas for every programme and get a buzz out of taking unusual properties under my wing, such as the toilets in Canterbury,' she chuckles. 'There's a lot of filming involved and I don't always know where I am going and when I'm going to be home. Often, I have to force myself to pause

momentarily and just breathe.' She admits it's a shame she doesn't have more time to visit her parents in Whitstable where she grew up. 'But,' she continues, 'as the children get older, life gets a little easier although, like most parents, we are in constant demand for rides to their various out of school activities; Leo is an academy football player for Wimbledon (following in his Dad's footsteps) and Kitty, a talented actress, attends the Rose Theatre. She's recently become interested in wheelchair racing through the Weir Archer Academy, a new charity set up by David Weir

and Jenny Archer. She's always been keen on sport.' And on this subject, Lucy mentions that her strong-willed daughter has almost forgotten that life is in her chair. 'She's cool with it and living in the now. What happened turned our lives upside down, but you can't dwell on the past.'

*Homes Under the Hammer airs weekdays on BBC 1 at 10am. Lucy is appearing in a programme with Len Goodman later this year in which she returns to Whitstable to reminisce about her childhood*

### LUCY'S TIPS FOR FIRST-TIME BUYERS

1. Buy with your head or your heart.
2. Buy in the right location – know your area.
3. Be brave and consider buying in areas that are up and coming.
4. Look at the railway links and nearby schools.
5. Know the market.
6. Get your house on the market.
7. Make sure you have sufficient funds in the bank - be ready and prepared to pounce when the right property comes along.
8. If you want to buy at auction, make sure you have seen the property first and have read the legal pack – if you can't complete within 28 days you are scuppered.

### UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

**LIFE MANTRA** Remember what it's like 'down there'. Things I once thought were bad are now not so bad.

**DREAM TV PROJECT** Build a house with Stewart or a travel show.

**FAVOURITE BOLTHOLE** Our apartment in the South of France.

**GUILTY PLEASURES** Cycling and kayaking in the river with the kids, taking Teddy, our cavapoo puppy, for long walks and going to the pub.