

REC'D FROM MRS L. COLLINS LID JANIS, 1974

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Mrs Ralph Whitlock with her husband, well-known author and broadcaster on country matters: she is happy to return to a West Country village after five years of "sterile" living in London.

I'm so happy to say goodbye to suburbia



THIS house into which we have just moved is said by the villagers to have been built by Cardinal Wolsey, when he was rector here, to house one of his girl-friends. Prosaic historians, who care more about accuracy than romance, retort that Wolsey was hardly ever resident during the year or so when he was rector of the parish, and that, anyhow, the house was built about a hundred years later.

Be that as it may, I shall stick to the fat Cardinal and his mistress. It should do wonders for the imagination of any guests occupying the Orchard Room, where she would have slept.

We have returned to the West Country after five years of exile in suburban London; a sterile experience, I found it.

Country-bred, I had misgivings when my husband's work required that we move to the metropolis, though I resolved to meet the new experience with an open mind. At the end I could hardly wait to get back to a village.

What is wrong with suburban life? I was living in a house which probably represents the acme of many housewives' ambition, and I wanted nothing better than to get away from it.

It was a nice suburban semi-detached, with four bedrooms and a modern kitchen. The rectangular back-garden was separated by a board fence from others equally symmetrical, the whole forming an island of lawns, trees and borders behind a protecting rampart of houses.

We had a resident population of garden birds, including a pair of blackbirds sensible enough to provide a roof for their heads by nesting under the front porch.

An amber-coloured street-lamp outside our window bathed our bedroom all night long in a soft, subdued golden twilight, and because of it the song-birds

By
HILDA WHITLOCK

woke earlier than in the countryside. We heard nearly as many birds, though not of such variety, and saw nearly as many flowering trees as we did when living in a village.

What, then, did I find so uncongenial about this attractive corner of one of London's more affluent suburbs? It reminded me sadly of those American homes for "senior citizens," concerning which a writer scathingly commented, "Here you can settle your elderly parents with the assurance that they will be well cared for for the rest of their lives, and that no-one need ever hear of them again."

I can well understand how an old person could lie dead for a month in a house such as ours. Once, not long after we moved into our suburban home, I was alone and unwell for more than a week, when my husband was away, without seeing a soul to speak to.

I must be fair. We found friends among our suburban neighbours after a time. Good, kindly friends. Perhaps five families, in five years. Yet, out of eight householders whose gardens adjoined ours, we never

learned even the names of six. I am prepared to believe that those were good, kindly folk, too, but we never saw them. Presumably they went out to work by day and returned, tired, in the evenings, to watch television.

It is good to live again in a village where I can leave the front door open all day long in summer. No front doors are ever left open in the suburbs, for cats, dogs and neighbours to stroll in and out. All are as blank as the expressions of the people one meets in the street. The end of our 50-yard little cul-de-sac marked the frontier of unknown territory: beyond that dwelt the strangers, whom you never even expected to speak to.

When you walk in a village street you expect to pass the time of day with the people you meet. In a town, you don't.

For all I know, I may have been guilty of the same aloofness. When you emerge from your hermitage and venture into the outer world, you preserve your privacy by slamming the shutters of your mind and of your eyes. You expect that all the people you meet will be strangers.

For three or four miles in every direction were streets of pleasant houses similar to ours. I used to walk them sometimes with the dog; there was pleasure in seeing what grew in the front gardens, but not as much as there would have been if one knew the gardeners.

Correction. I did know the gardeners. There were about four of them, employed by perhaps rather more than half the house-

holders in the neighbourhood. Village gardens are cultivated for pleasure and for the kitchen; town gardens more often are for appearances.

This was also the realm of net curtains. Most houses had them and I found shops that stocked nothing else.

I can appreciate the advantage of net curtains in a downstairs room by a busy street, but not in upstairs rooms that cannot be overlooked. Yet I saw them even in the windows of the umpteenth floor of skyscrapers, where only God or a helicopter pilot could possibly peep in.

On my last Saturday in London I went into three shops where I had traded for the past four or five years. In each I was served by assistants who, although addressed pleasantly enough over such matters as price and change, did not utter one word.

I like human beings. I need warmth and companionship, and I know there are hazards to country living, like the old widow who lived in my native village and who, feeling poorly one morning, decided she would enjoy a lie-in.

"Never again!" she declared later. "By the time I'd got out of bed to answer the fourth neighbour who called up at the window to know if I was all right, because she hadn't seen any smoke from my chimney, I knew I might just as well get up."

Having experienced both ways of life, I know which I prefer. Out of the shadows, into the sunlight, for me... and I'll take the risk of the warmth being a bit embarrassing.