



# Share in the community

With family activities galore and green credentials, Lower Mill is the ultimate middle-class holiday resort. But will it be out-glammed by its new rival? **Jonathan Margolis** reports

There's a buzz at the Gloucestershire village hog roast. The word is going round that the prizes for the competition are being given by a celebrity staying locally for the weekend.

"Harry and Mischa say it's going to be Darcey Bussell. Is that really true?" says a little girl to an attractive young woman drinking champagne with her husband and their friends on a picnic rug.

"Yes, darling," says her father, a CEO in wraparound shades, well-cut hair and shorts. "Do you know who that is?" "Course I do," scolds the child. "She's, like, THE prima ballerina."

"You know what," says the father in an aside to his friends, all similarly attired, "I really think those school fees are paying off."

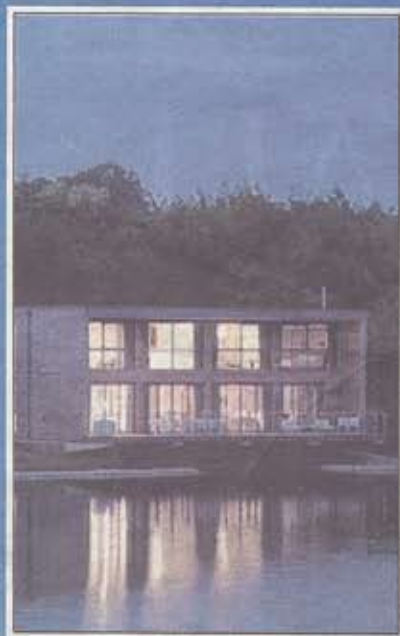
It is a classic scene from upper-middle-class Britain at play: beautifully mannered kids, tasteful food, good wines and conversation ranging from City deals to sailing and theatre. The oddity is that everyone at Lower Mill Estate, near Cirencester, is very similar to the people I am eavesdropping on.

They're not all mega-rich or up-market — there are as many Birmingham and Bristol accents as there are Kensington ones. But they're all nice, considerate, concerned modern people. Even the dogs here seem well behaved.

This was a village fête, but not in a village as we know it. Ten years ago, the families were strangers and the land was a farm and gravel quarry. Lower Mill Estate, whose longest-established residents have been here for six years, is now a gated holiday village of 190 homes in 550 acres of pretty lakes and nature reserve.

Modelled on places such as Port Grimaud, in France, or Seaside, Florida — architecturally virtuous communities for holidaying urbanites — it is the creation of Jeremy Paxton, a champion water-skier turned magazine publisher turned developer. Help has come from architectural luminaries such as Richard Reid, Will Alsop, Richard Meier, Sarah Featherstone and Frank Gehry.

A basic £450,000 at Lower Mill, plus £2,500 service charge, gets you a 1,500 sq ft limestone-built lakeside three-bed by Reid. This includes access to the 550 acres, as well as membership of the £6m spa and pools. There is a host of other attractions — sailing, tennis, allotments,



The Lakes seeks out Notting Hill types; Lower Mill attracts people from Hampstead

The wooden 'lodges' at The Lakes show Philippe Starck's influence, from the sleek waterfront decks to the funky white decor that characterises the interior

a shop, art studios and bird-watching hides. And there are plans for an outdoor theatre, an equestrian centre, an astronomical observatory and a pub.

As Lower Mill fan Kevin McCloud, the Sunday Times columnist and presenter of Channel 4's *Grand Designs*, puts it: "It's still cheaper than the Costa del Sol, and here you have it all year round." (In fact, you have it for 11 months of the year; the local planning people require a month's closedown.)

Getting there shouldn't add much to your carbon footprint, either — an important consideration for environmentally savvy middle-class buyers. Nor, unlike their friends snapping up cottages in Rock or Padstow, can the good residents of Lower Mill be accused of turning "real villages" into ghost towns or pricing the locals out of the market, which is good for the conscience too.

So far, so zeitgeisty. It's hardly surprising, then that Lower Mill, due to have 577 homes by 2017, has now spawned its first direct rival. With an eye on Paxton's success, two of London's most celebrated developers start construction next week on another holiday village just down the road, targeted, it seems, at London's rock'n'roll set.

The Lakes by yoo, whose first 18 buyers — including Jade Jagger and the inevitable, if unnamed, Premiership footballer — take possession next summer, is the project of John Hitchcox and Anton Bilton. Hitchcox, co-founder of the Manhattan Loft Corporation, heads Philippe Starck's global property design and development company, yoo — hence the not very Olde Cotwoldsey name. Bilton is an entrepreneur whose Raven Group spans residential and commercial projects, lately in Russia.

What marks out this project is its artful pulling of celebrity strings. Hitchcox and Bilton have marshalled the design talents of the likes of Jagger, Sophie Conran and Starck to scatter stardust over the 650 acres of the former Claydon Pike gravel works, near Lechlade.

The Starck people are striving to compete with Paxton in terms of eco-credentials; like him, they have a vision of giving middle-class children a taste of old-fashioned, 'Swallows and Amazons'-type weekends and hols.

There are crucial differences, though, that will send different vibes to different buyers. It's as if, in London terms, The



Yoo, Adrian Sherratt

The homes at Lower Mill were designed with tips from Frank Gehry and Will Alsop



Steve Rowley, 42, with his wife, Vicky, 36, and their son, Luke, praises the community spirit at Lower Mill Estate

Lakes seeks out Notting Hill and Chelsea types, while Lower Mill attracts people from Hampstead and Richmond.

The Lakes, for instance, will have "concierge services", the *sine qua non* of any upmarket development these days, along with — planners permitting — a 200-bedroom luxury lakeside hotel with "an eastern, zen vibe". And, instead of re-creating a village, Hitchcox and Bilton have gone for all-wood constructions along the lakesides. The homes, officially classed as "holiday lodges", are built from prefab kits trucked in from Slovenia and made of Russian larch. The overall effect is more Alberta than Gloucestershire.

The lodges are made to last, the developers promise, but, as Bilton explains from Brazil, where he is working on a similar project aimed at the international set, "ours is very much a design-driven scheme rather than a bricks-and-mortar scheme".

It's a revealing thought, especially, perhaps, for the grandson of the builder Percy Bilton. The implication is that, even with its great scenic beauty, The Lakes, from its amazingly slick website to the buildings themselves, is fractionally more style than substance.

Not that this will bother buyers, one suspects. And lodges at The Lakes, which start at £775,000, are undoubtedly stylish, with pretty decks and funky interiors. The houses go for a seaside-cabin effect, while the show homes are kitted out in white furniture on white resin floor, with ironic crystal chandelier mould. For another £80,000, you can have centrally controlled music systems that blast sounds into every room, and CCTV, allowing parents who leave offspring in residence to log in from afar and check up on their parties.

The Lakes prices are certainly perky — those behind it admit that they charge 15%-20% extra for the development being touched by the yoo name, which begs the question of whether, should yoo ever stop being the new black, it might turn out not to be the best investment. Celebrity residents may turn out to be a huge boost to values, so long as they remain — and remain celebrities.

That £775,000 (plus a £3,500 service charge for such things as security by former Gurkhas) buys a magnificent four-bed lodge of 2,500 sq ft — but within earshot of lorries on the busy A417. A more tranquil spot further back will cost at least £1m. Hitchcox says the second phase of building, from 2009, will see £2m properties.

Whether buyers will stump up that kind of money for a flat-roofed wooden construction remains to be seen — although none will be preoccupied with counting their pennies. "Quite a lot of the people buying are extraordinarily wealthy," Hitchcox says. "These are people who've looked at large piles in the country and said, no, actually, this works for me because my kids get an environment and I don't have to worry about looking after the estate."

Yet, while a ton of ink has been spilled on Lower Mill's architecture and environmental projects, and another ton will be expended describing The Lakes' fashionable interiors, the thing that has crept up on everyone, Paxton included, is the community spirit that has sprung up at his development, and that the Starck people hope to replicate at The Lakes.

Steve Rowley, 42, a management consultant from Wolverhampton, and his South African wife, Vicky, 36, bought at Lower Mill six years ago. "We've seen it grow up from the beginning, and if the development had gone the way we feared, we wouldn't have stayed," Rowley says. "But it's brilliant. Jeremy has worked a miracle. It's a real community. We've made so many friends down here, it's unbelievable. And the kids just spend their whole time on their bikes and socialising. It's a truly amazing place to live."

The challenge faced by Hitchcox and Bilton is to build that kind of enthusiasm among the more fickle celebrity set.

■ [www.lowermillestate.com](http://www.lowermillestate.com);  
[thelakesbyyoo.com](http://thelakesbyyoo.com)

## STYLE OR SUBSTANCE?

See more pictures of Lower Mill and The Lakes by yoo at [timesonline.co.uk/property](http://timesonline.co.uk/property)