

LIFE PROPERTY

As many pubs fall on hard times, an increasing number of people are enjoying the benefits of living in a converted hostelry. **Caroline McGhie** looks at some of the most interesting opportunities for home buyers

There is a kind of bucolic romance attached to living in an old pub. It isn't that we want to keep the floors covered in sawdust, or sleep with the smell of hops in our nostrils. But it does offer a connection to the fast-vanishing past. According to the Campaign for Real Ale, Britain's pubs are closing at a rate of 31 per week, a loss mourned by many communities. However, successful home owners are snapping them up to turn into unusual houses. The King's Head, it turns out, can become a very happy home.

Up on his roof terrace on the Isle of Dogs, Matt Ross can gaze at the Shard, London Bridge and Canary Wharf, and at night he can see the green laser in the sky that marks the meridian line in Greenwich. He has the top three floors of the former Cubitt Arms, built in 1864 as part of Cubitt Town, which once belonged to the Millwall Canal Company. The bottom two floors are owned by the artist Vanda Harvey, who has a studio in the basement and has turned the former girls' lavatories into a second bedroom.

They bought the pub together at the end of 2010, fighting off restaurant owners by offering cash, without knowing if they would get planning permission for conversion.

"It had been empty for a couple of years and in another six months it would have been beyond rescue," says Matt, a lawyer in the City. They had already acquired south London for a pub to convert, because Matt loves pubs.

"Pubs are completely solid, very flexible internally, with wonderful high ceilings and big windows," he says. "You can make any kind of design and open up floors. They are often in corner positions so there are three sides to play with, whereas a terrace house has only two external walls."

Matt and Vanda spent £850,000 putting in steel beams, re-roofing, slinging open floors and making two separate spectacular houses. "I wanted to do something organic, and not many buildings allow you to do that. With this there are lots of huge living spaces, but only three bedrooms."

The pair gained planning permission without a hitch. Out went the bar and the empty barrels from Truman's Brewery. In came City chic. It looks converted like an industrial warehouse conversion, yet stylish, like a leaf out of Notting Hill that has blown east. The exterior has been retained so that it still looks as it did when it was the heart and soul of this part of London. Because of his



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Barrels of character: Matt Ross on the roof terrace of the Cubitt Arms, the East London pub that he and friend Vanda Harvey converted into two stylish homes

long work hours, Matt now wants to move closer into the City, so he is selling his share of the pub through Harropsons International (020 7348 2862, harropsons.co.uk) at £1.8 million.

Campaigners say London and the South East are losing more pubs than any other part of the country. They argue that because pubs can be turned into shops or supermarkets without planning permission, they should be better protected. The loss can touch a nerve in the community.

The Cross Keys in Lawrence Street, Chelsea, acquired site status through being frequented by Dylan Thomas, the Rolling Stones and Bob Marley. The pub was opened in 1708 but closed in 2012 when it started to

lose money. Then squatters moved in. The previous owner tried to turn it into a 11th-floor, five-bedroom house with a pool, sauna and cinema, but there was a campaign to keep it as a pub.

Tony Ainsley-Jones has now come to the rescue. He paid £3.9 million to buy it and promised to upgrade and reopen the pub on the ground floor, while converting the upper floors into flats. "I have managed to keep the mosaic of the old owner in the pub and the acreboards. He also kept the lovely, heavy, old Edwardian door handles." They bought it for £300,000 and have spent more on the restoration.

Their plan was to take an ugly duckling and make it into a beautiful swan. "It was well built,

so we could cream all the bricks," says Giles. "And it was arranged around a courtyard, which works well because the house is private and inward-looking." The pair have also made sure that the property is as energy-efficient as a new house.

"It is sad that rural pubs are dying out, but I think everyone in the village is pleased that this is no longer an eyesore," says Giles.

They are now selling The Swan at £545,000 through Jackson-Stops & Shaw (01236 265723, jackson-stops.co.uk).

Like most pubs, it sits at the heart of the village, so the owners will be able to observe the comings and goings of residents. Just be careful how closely you look, you might end up seeing a stiff drink.

However, as the years passed, the pub fell into disrepair. Primarily it came to the market with planning permission for residential use, and two would-be developers, Giles Gibbs and Roger Gordon, fought it.

"It was in a shocking state," says Giles. "It still had the original thimble bar at one end, beer barrels and a long skittle alley at the back with scoreboard. We have managed to keep the mosaic of the old owner in the pub and the acreboards. He also kept the lovely, heavy, old Edwardian door handles." They bought it for £300,000 and have spent more on the restoration.

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