

# Bollywood comes to Beaconsfield

It looks like a palace in a romantic movie – but this house designed for a British Indian millionaire is actually in the Home Counties. **Caroline McGhie** reports

Now that Shilpa Shetty is an A-list celebrity in Britain, how will she spend her new-found millions? She'll need a house, for a start – so when she starts to survey the property market, where will she head? Will it be Kensington, where there were nearly 100 sales at more than £3million last year, or perhaps the Cotswolds, where Elizabeth Hurley and Prince Charles have their private estates? The answer could well be somewhere rather more prosaic, Beaconsfield.

A wave of wealthy British Indians are flexing their buying power, moving out of the London homes where they made good and buying into the millionaire commuter belt in the posh parts of the Home Counties. There is a new "Asian Arc" stretching from Watford, Hertfordshire, through Beaconsfield and Gerrards Cross in Buckinghamshire to St George's Hill in Surrey, and it is pushing sky-high property prices even higher.

British Indians are moving out from west London for good schools and commutability, to Beaconsfield, Gerrards Cross and the leafy villages around Slough such as Taplow, Iwer and Stoke Poges," says Nick Warner of Savills in Beaconsfield. He notes that British Indians whose businesses have prospered are interested in both £5million houses and the £1-£3million range, ratcheting up a highly competitive market in an area which is already "very, very prime".

Money is no object. Indeed, it is there to be spent and they are proud of it. The top 300 millionaires in last year's British Asian Rich List, headed by steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal, had a combined worth

of £35.5billion. Indian companies are on the move, with Tata Steel taking over Corus, and Ananova bidding for the National Lottery. While Shilpa Shetty seduced a huge television audience on *Celebrity Big Brother*, the arts world has fallen in love with Indian film-makers and novelists such as Gurinder Chadha, who made *Bend It Like Beckham*, and Kiran Desai, winner of the Man Booker Prize with *The Inheritance of Loss*. As the *Calcutta Telegraph* noted, Tata, Desai and Shilpa have just pulled off "an Indian hat-trick in London".

For many British Indians, it is the end of a remarkable journey that began with the expulsion of thousands of Asians from Kenya and Uganda in the 1960s and 1970s. Many arrived in the UK with nothing more than an unshakeable work ethic and a belief in good education and social betterment. Others came to wealth more recently after India embraced the free market in the 1990s. According to Merrill Lynch's world wealth report, India now has 87,000 millionaires.

"The year of 2007 is going to be very big for Indian buyers," says Jaideep Singh, who has been Knight Frank's expert on the Indian market for almost a decade. "The rich are getting richer and now the middle-class



Indians are coming here to set up offices and buy a place – but they are shocked that their £2million will buy so little."

Jaideep has recently shown four or five houses to Indian buyers in St George's Hill, Weybridge, the exclusive estate in Surrey where John Lennon and Tom Jones lived, and where Sir Cliff Richard still owns a house. "Discretion is important," he says. "I am looking for huge houses but I cannot talk about it. Since I began, the business has multiplied 100 to 200 times."

No wonder Savills estate agents has launched a bespoke Indian desk, run by 26-year-old Sheetell Halai. "The Indian economy is taking off," says Sheetell, who toyed with a Bollywood film career before commerce won through. "There are 2.7million Indians in this country and so many new millionaires, so it makes sense to offer a bespoke service. Also there are language and cultural barriers. The caste system, for instance, still matters with many people."

Her task is to help Indian buyers, both here and coming into the country. "Indians are master hagglers. If someone offers a property worth £10million, an Indian buyer will immediately think of half the value and then find somewhere between the two. I don't think that is rude. In order to build up and manage relationships I need to make sure we do not overvalue."

British Indians who have done well, she says, are now moving out from areas like Stanmore and Harrow-on-the-Hill, where they already own the biggest houses in the street. "They have big but they want bigger: 4,000 sq ft is about right," she says.

Those moving into country mansions often choose to live near friends, but for pioneers this was not possible. When Maya and Yogi Sachdev arrived in England nine years ago, so that Yogi could develop his speciality chemical business, they bought near Cobham in Surrey. Now they are selling their six-bedroom house for £4.25million through Savills (020 7499 8644). "We chose this area because the schools are excellent," says Maya, "but now our two children have left



**Household name** When Shilpa Shetty goes house-hunting in the UK, she could follow her countrymen who are moving out of London to buy larger homes in Beaconsfield, above, or Gerrards Cross, where Indian developers are creating luxury properties such as Shaanti, inset, whose driveway is lined with waterfalls

home for America we need to downsize. When we first came we knew no one, but we are a well travelled family and we had no difficulty."

Sheetell is hoping that Shilpa Shetty will come to her when she wants to buy a house, and she has already given it some thought. Despite the exodus to Beaconsfield, Shilpa will be more at home in London's Primrose Hill, Sheetell believes, as it is central and arty. "Indians want to put their money into the British property market because it is the safest in the world," she says. "They'll always choose property rather than the stock market."

Sadly, English houses don't always come up to expectations: the rooms seem small, and many need another £1million spent to bring them up to the standard required. So now a new breed of British Indian developers is creating the right kind of new houses. Among them are Harjit Singh and Superna Sethi, whose company, Manhattan, is rebuilding a property in Gerrards Cross. The result, in the sought-after Camp Road, will be a palatial 16,000 sq ft house named Shaanti, meaning "Peace". It will have an Olympic-size pool, and waterfalls alongside a heated driveway.

"We chose Gerrards Cross because it has more millionaires than anywhere else in the country, and dictates more pounds per sq ft," Superna says. They are refurbishing a second house called Wykehurst, which they say will be as smart as an international hotel. "I must rename it," says Harjit, whose previous career was as a film producer and actor.

"Bollywood is all glamour but not enough money," he observes. "Property is less glamour but more money." They now have their eye on a Grade II-listed mansion with 25 acres at Fulmer, near Beaconsfield. "We have hardly started yet," Harjit says. With India predicted to be the world's second largest economy by 2050, he may be right.

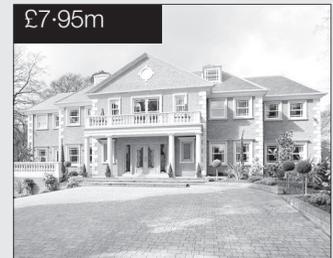
'This year will be very big for Indian buyers. The rich are getting richer'

## A pad for a princess



**Foxholm, Weybridge** A seven-bedroom, five bathroom Grade II Victorian Gothic property with coach house and secluded gardens. Savills 0845 402 9630

**Oakland House, Weybridge** Six bedroom suites, swimming pool, landscaped gardens, pool room bar and split-level "entertaining terrace". Knight Frank 01372 464496



**Medomsley, St George's Hill** A hi-tech seven-bedroom house with cinema room, gym, tennis court and landscaped gardens with outdoor hot tub. Knight Frank 01372 464496

## Pretty as a picture house

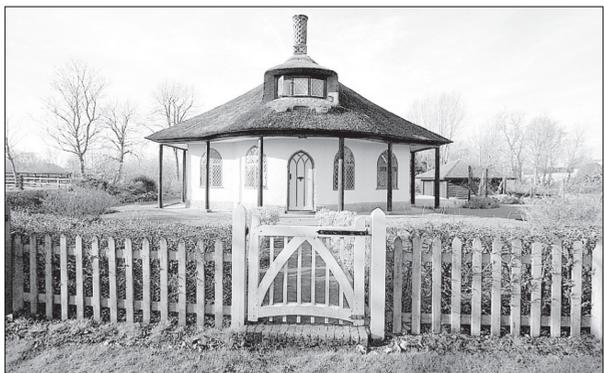
It looks as if it should be made of sugar and gingerbread, straight out of a fairy story. In fact The Round House at Ixworth, Suffolk, is an unusual "cottage orné", built when the aristocracy were in love with all things picturesque. It is a rarity on the market, a little gem conceived as an architectural plaything.

"It was built in about 1840 as a gate lodge for Ixworth Abbey, which was a priory before Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries," says its owner, John Cross, who is selling it through Bidwells (01473 611644) for £375,000.

"It is a gothic revival, and we think the design was probably taken from a pattern book. It was fashionable at the time to build something which looked as if it belonged in 1340 instead of 1840."

The Round House came with farming land which John's father, Stanley Cross, bought in 1957. "I used it as a farm cottage and latterly as a retirement cottage for a retired farm worker," John says. But in 1990 he approached the architect Charles Morris, who would later design The Orchard Room at Highgrove for Prince Charles, and asked him to extend it.

The simple, tiny rounded shape with a single bedroom in the thatched roof-



**Hidden depths** The large extension, by Prince Charles's architect, is invisible from the road

cap grew an extraordinary 15ft thatched passageway across the garden, linking it to an extension containing three bedrooms, a bathroom and a utility room. At the same time John laid out a Victorian garden with a rose garden, an orchard and a nuttery.

The 19th-century love of the "picturesque" grew out of a desire to

return to things that were wild and romantic in the face of increasing mechanisation and uniformity. According to Candida Lycett Green in her book *English Cottages*, the term was first used in the 1780s by the schoolmaster and vicar William Gilpin, who spent his holidays painting romantic rugged scenes. "The rules of picturesque beauty," he said, "are drawn from nature... all the formalities of hedge-row trees, and square divisions of property, are disgusting to a high degree."

So cottages, dairies and dog-kennels appeared on the big estates in the "cottage orné" style. It was whimsy in the extreme, and people who lived in them were even supposed to dress accordingly and look like gypsies or happy shepherds. "In the village of Selworthy in Somerset, villagers were encouraged to linger on the green, and in Old Warden, Bedfordshire, they were asked to wear red cloaks and bonnets to match the paintwork of the cottages," Lycett Green writes.

Potential buyers will be relieved to know that is not a requirement at The Round House.

CAROLINE MCGHIE

## Character cottages for sale



**£379,950**  
**Coton, Northampton** Four-bedroom Spinney Cottage is believed to date from the 17th century. Bidwells 01604 605050



**£470,000**  
**Hemingford Abbots, Cambs** The White Cottage offers four bedrooms, and a thatched dog on the roof. Bidwells

## telegraph garden

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