

Property

TIME FOR A PEASANTS' REVOLT?

The rain is driving against our office windows, orange leaves are clogging the drains outside while here in the warm, we are knee deep in... scout huts.

A curious feature of running a property advice service is that frequently we get the same sort of charity turning to us all at once, despite working in different parts of the country and having diverse property issues. Hence this week is Scouters Week. Last month we were overflowing with a water mill, a new jetty and a water sports centre, while the month before that, Dr Doolittle rocked: cats' home, dogs' home, donkey sanctuary. Before that, how green was our valley - community gardens, asset transfer parks, and legacy fields in custodial trusts. The property god we serve certainly likes a laugh.

Today however, apart from the unprepared agonies of Scouters wrestling with subsidence, I am pondering the historic relationship of ownership and tenancy. If William the Conqueror had not beaten nice holistic Saxon Harold down in Hastings, would the landlord tenant relationship be different today? In every other business transaction, clients are feted and flattered – or at least not treated like mugs to their faces. Yet though we have Facebook and Instagram, there remains that old Norman feudal order, where a tenant is considered a powerless supplicant villein – whether residential or commercial. Perhaps we're missing a trick and should advise clients to do less social media and more tithing of their chickens to the lord of the manor on Lammastide.

It doesn't help our villein voluntary sector, that we are not in general much interested in property because we want to change the world. We also tend to be more enthusiastic about helping others than exploiting them. So let's get more Norman! My advice for your next team meeting: shout altogether Get Off Our Land You Varlet! Great assertiveness training and far more bracing than a group hug.

Last November the Ethical Property Foundation in partnership with the Charity Commission and RICS, published our 2016

Charity Property Matters Survey. It's short, pithy and centred on property knowledge, cost, risk and space...

Hence 48 per cent believe their property is the biggest threat to their sustainability; close to one third worry about lack of security of tenure while 43 per cent have suffered unforeseen property costs. Then there is the fact that over a quarter now rent from the private sector - a fast rising figure since our first survey in 2012 – and a very different relationship to the laissez faire of the local council of yore.

Our sector's natural diffidence about bare knuckle negotiation plus our lack of interest in property - added to funny money property economics and the fact that many think we work for free, result in rotten working conditions unless we are careful. This is because we are, and I quote the landlord who rang today offering me a fume filled lower basement in Blackfriars - 'only' charities. The fact 58 per cent of respondents can't obtain grant funding for property costs further tips the balance.

So how can we stand up for ourselves? After nearly three years in this job, I have come to the conclusion that the alchemy of charities and their property is as much to do with attitude as money. It boils down to how much are you prepared to put up with for your cause?

Smart trustees and charity managers need to be celebrated and supported in becoming property savvy so that they can handle property professionals with knowledge and on equal terms. Hence why our National Programme for Property Education launches next year. We're running workshops across England and Wales and offering online resources to help as many colleagues as possible to understand the role property plays in their success.

Many of us are looking to buy commercial property and many more are looking to co-locate. New technology is freeing us to look at hubs and hot desking and flexible working. It's been a thousand years since William conquered: time for a (voluntary sector) peasants' revolt. ■



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