

## ‘Everyone dreams of their own boathouse’

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Ees Wyke, with views of Esthwaite Water, is on sale with Sothebys for £1.25 million

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There are some stunning properties in the Lake District, but the retired financial analyst Stephen Sykes and his wife, Janine, a former optometrist, are especially proud to call “Hill Top” home. Their converted 17th-century Lakeland long-house in Ealinghearth, Haverthwaite, once belonged to the author Arthur Ransome.

Ransome, whose classic tale of 1920s childhood adventure, *Swallows and Amazons*, has now been made into a film bought Hill Top in 1960 and lived there for seven years. The author and his Russian wife, Evgenia, undertook an impressive renovation programme, including a new study for Arthur. It was Ransome’s last home — he died in 1967 and is buried with Evgenia in St Paul’s Church in Rusland, just over two miles away.



The film adaptation of *Swallows and Amazons* is sure to raise the profile of the Lake District. Stephen and Janine, who were recently invited to the world premiere of *Swallows and Amazons*, in Keswick, moved here permanently from Tunbridge Wells, Kent, in 2012. By then, the house had been used as kennels.

A substantial task was to demolish outbuildings to create a courtyard garden. The couple, who are both in their sixties, paid about £700,000 for Hill Top, and spent half a million pounds on conversion and renovation to provide a self-contained holiday cottage, which they run as a business.

“People come here and are gobsmacked by the location,” says Stephen. “But when we bought it we didn’t know it was so good. Every time we came it was misty. We moved in in early February and the day we arrived was so beautiful — the view was revealed. All the blokes who did the removals started taking photos. We thought with the location — we’ve got views over the Rusland Valley, from the Coniston Fells to the estuary of the River Leven at Morecambe Bay — and the history of having had the Ransomes living there, it’s got to be a fantastic buy.”

It’s a well-known Lakeland coincidence that the two children’s authors most associated with the area lived in houses with the same name. The creator of *Peter Rabbit*, Beatrix Potter, lived a few miles away in her own “Hill Top”. She was born 150 years ago this year, with the anniversary just one possible reason for a new-found interest in the area. It is contributing to a shift in the kind of buyers attracted to the location, says Helen Lancaster, an associate partner at the Carter Jonas estate agency in Kendal. “The most popular areas are Bowness, Windermere, Ambleside and Keswick,” she says. “It’s probably the intrinsic landscape quality, the mountains, the lakes.

“We still have people coming up wanting to downsize to a cottage, or looking for a large estate to set up a shoot. However, we also have people who come up for a couple of weeks or months at a time. Lots of these people are wanting to sail, ski, wind-surf. Everybody wants a

boathouse — I could sell one for half a million, I'm sure. The population is much more health-conscious now. Also they're looking for that sense of place promoted by organisations such as the National Trust. I just think that in the next 10 to 15 years we could see a whole sea change in market demand.”

The Lowbridge estate has views of Windermere and is on sale for £3.75 million with Carter Jonas

The Lake District is also gaining a reputation as a serious foodie destination, with two Michelin-starred restaurants, L'Enclume in Cartmel (although this property hotspot is several miles outside the national park boundary) and The Samling in Ambleside. Cumbria is also reported to have more micro-breweries than any other county in Britain.

One of the attractions for buyers is the choice of property, from terraced homes to quintessential Lakeland cottages and grand houses built for the wealthy northern industrialists who spent summers here in the late 19th and early 20th-centuries and travelled by train to the station at Windermere.

Despite some stunning possibilities, such as the Lowbridge estate in Selside, Kendal, a commanding £3.25 million Victorian mansion with a lake, boathouse, tennis court and 1,927 acres of land, the property website Rightmove reports that the majority of Lake District sales in the past year were terraced houses, selling for an average £178,893. This may reflect not just affordability for locals, but the changing buyer demographic that Lancaster mentions.

The average price in the Lake District, the most-populated and largest national park in England and Wales, is £233,350. The most expensive spots are Grasmere (£373,939), Ambleside (£297,334) and Coniston (£301,467).

With prices in this bracket, there are inevitable issues with finance for local people on low wages. And of course, there is the issue of second-homeowners dominating certain towns and villages. Recent government research suggests that the proportion of second homes could be as much as 50 per cent in some locations.

However, Lancaster believes that improved connectivity is helping to break down barriers between the long-established population and newcomers, because more people are living and working in the Lakes rather than arriving at weekends.

The characters in Swallows and Amazons enjoy sailing on the Lakes

“We have a lot of people now choosing to work from home — you can get 4G and superfast broadband speeds in various locations — who contribute to the local economy,” she says.

“Some might choose to work part of the week at home, then travel to work. London from Oxenholme station is now possible in under two hours, 40 minutes direct. We also have good connections coming out of Manchester, with the Ordsall Chord (a new rail link between Piccadilly, Oxford Road and Victoria stations) improving things further.”

Lancaster's view, that there is growing interest from buyers from Manchester and Birmingham, is countered by Mark Holden, the director at Savills in Wilmslow, who emphasises that he still gets more inquiries about the Lake District from outside the northwest — many from the south of England, the east coast and overseas. “It's a buoyant market attracting both UK and international buyers,” he says. “It's not impossible to get to by train or car [via the M6]. They will most likely have visited several times and fallen in love with the area.”

Like the Sykes, many of these buyers will eventually make the move permanent, helping the market in the Lake District to evolve.

The children of *Swallows and Amazons* regarded the Lakes as a magical place for sailing, camping, fishing and exploring, the scene of the ultimate adventure. Ransome would be proud to see his vision still alive almost a century after he imagined it.

**ENDS**