How it feels to...

...be a millennial property guardian

As the housing crisis bites, tenants are taking on vacant premises in return for cut-price rents. *Jonnie Bayfield*, a veteran guardian for the past six years, has braved mould, mice and some curious neighbours

Six years ago, I began living in disused buildings in London. So far I've made my home in five properties, and I've come to understand what it means to sleep, work and play within the most unconventional of living spaces.

From the moment I left drama school (I was planning to be an actor back then) I knew I wanted to stay in London, but I also knew that the city's rental market was not for me. Too much admin, too little control and the underlying suspicion that some distant, minted landlord is benefiting from my millennial misery. If I was going to relinquish power, money and self-regard to get along, then I wanted to do it on the cheap, and this is exactly what being a "property guardian" can offer.

In the desperate age of the housing shortage, several companies run guardian schemes, recruiting people like me to look after empty houses and commercial premises on behalf of absent owners. A recent government study shows just how big this trend for cheap, alternative housing has become. It's estimated that there are between 5,000 and 7,000 of us nesting in former private- and public-sector buildings, which range from care homes to hospitals, office blocks and ordinary residential houses.

The first place I moved into, in 2013 as a skint 20-year-old, was a former retirement home in Tottenham, north London. Right from the start, it was an eye-opening experience. On Friday nights, the place was transformed into a hipster jungle of Poundland bindis, loose trousers and half-opened MacBooks spewing dub'n'bass music. Everybody who lived there was on drugs and, from what I could hear through very thin walls, was fond of bondage sex YouTube tutorials.

At £300 a month, though, the rooms were a snatch. Designed originally to harbour the infirm, not the young and fun, they retained the distinctive perfumes of their former occupants, and came complete with shiny wipe-down walls and floors, which I now fervently believe should be a feature of all interior design. Each room had its own sink in the corner, but no toilet — the communal loo was a hike away. I confess that as the weeks skipped by, urinating into the sink in the early hours became the new normal. Well, for me at least.

The fashionable take at the moment is that guardianship is a wonder cure for the housing crisis. I'm not so sure. My inkling is that it's simply a sticking plaster over a wound. The years I've spent living in these weird and wonderful properties have not only been thought-provoking and at times amusing, but often degrading and downright dangerous. I have stood in skips, up to my knees in rubbish, punting through the black bags with a broomstick in a feeble attempt to compact the waste because the bin men no longer believe the building is in use. Could there be a finer image to sum up the gauntlet of millennial city life?

> The living room had a leak so bad that the council had plans to turn it into a public lido

There is some procedure involved in signing up to become a guardian — providing references and the like — but, in my experience, if you can prove you are not a total waster, then you're in. There's no knowing how many other people you'll be living with — it can be a handful, or none at all. You swap your basic human rights for cheap rent, an interesting space and, if you're lucky, an antique stumbled upon in an old cupboard that the previous occupants left behind.

Buildings being looked after by guardians tend to be in a state of disrepair, decay or mass infestation. I have never had the luxury of central heating, and seldom had hot water, despite this being a legal requirement. It's a first-world problem, I realise, but I now know shower pressure to be absolutely crucial to one's overarching sense of happiness. In my current home, where I live with my long-suffering girlfriend, Daniela, the shower is barely a dribble.

The worst I've had it was in 2015. My co-guardians and I were the first people to take on a former sheltered accommodation unit in east London, which sat at the base of a block of flats. According to a paranoid plumber we met, this was where the police "stored" recently released convicts and the mentally vulnerable.

To this day, it is the only place where I've seen rising damp fall. When we moved in, steel shutters had to be wrenched from the front of the property, and on the first night somebody tried to smash down the front door as Daniela and I cowered in terror. In the middle of the living room there was a leak so substantial that I'm certain the council had

HOME TRUTHS

37%

The average percentage of income spent on rent by property guardians in London. The average for regular tenants in the capital is 61%

LONDON ASSEMBLY, ONTHEMARKET.COM 2018

drug den intercom flared, marking the arrival of one of Texas's clients. Before we knew it, a man pushed through the side gate and stood there, separated from us only by a plyboard wall jammed between a bush and a gutter. The guy's name was Iain, and when we'd seen him before he'd always been high as a kite and staggering off in the other direction. This time, he seemed sober and rather mellow.

"Do you mind if I, like, just sit down against this wall for a bit?" he asked shyly. We nodded. Iain settled on the other side of the divide, chatting to us about the weather and admiring Daniela's handiwork in the garden. Just as we began guzzling our malbec (from Aldi, of course), we heard

The alarm system went berserk and within minutes the police turned up clutching Tasers

the familiar gurgle and burn of smack in a spoon. Conversation fizzled and we dusted off lunch, intermittently checking on a now comatose Iain. Eventually, as we pruned brambles, he uttered some slurred words and vanished back through the side gate.

This building was not the kind of place where one would aim to raise a child, which is why I was rather taken aback when our Nigerian housemate Chief walked in one Monday morning clutching an actual baby. Chief worked as a nurse for the NHS and within weeks of us living there, he'd smuggled his wife, Jane, into the property. Every time the agency in charge of the guardianship sent an inspector round, Jane would hide in one of the spare rooms because bringing in your wife would constitute a break of contract. But months later, Chief went and sired a child, which meant the couple could not easily be removed from the property.

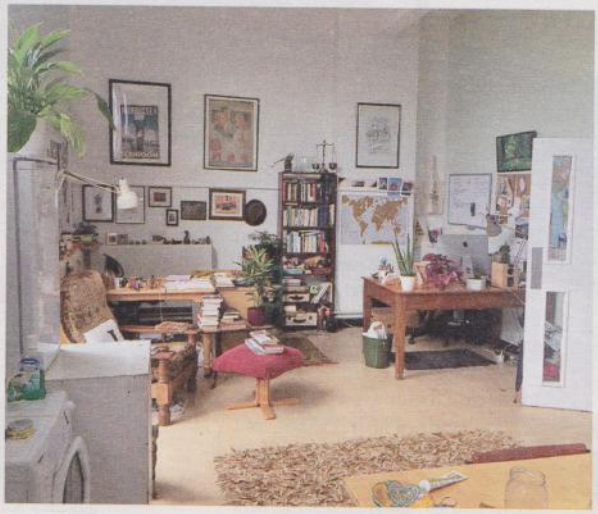
To this day I applaud Chief's boldness, and the fact that Jane managed to conceal her pregnancy from us until she went into labour. Truth is, I had noticed that she was swelling at the stomach, but like a good, repressed Englishman I thought it best not to mention it. Then "the Baby David", as he became known to us all, rocked up and screamed for six months solid.

How it feels to...

Daniela and I were invited by Chief to attend the traditional African naming ceremony, along with our other housemate, Luke. It took place in our own living room, beneath the feet of the rocking addicts upstairs. Like three agnostic sardines, we crammed in among 30 Nigerian evangelists. The pastor took a keen interest in us, and levelled the lion's share of his best vitriolic devil-denouncing material in our direction. He could clearly sense our lack of faith.

We sang, we danced, we incanted the baby's name several hundred times, and afterwards we stood around in our crumbling kitchen and got drunk with Chief and his family while eating tubs of chicken and rice, keeping the noise down so that the mice and the newborn babe could sleep.

Unexpected events such as these show how being a guardian of a property can give fleeting access to the profound. But though guardian living is on the rise, the living conditions are often not for everyone. According to the recent government report, 22% of guardians are dissatisfied with repairs and maintenance of their property, while 37% are dealing with mould and condensation on a daily basis. In keeping with my own experience, just 45% of guardians are able to keep their living areas warm, which means over half, including me (currently dressed in a poncho, slippers, hoodie and long johns) are freezing their bollocks off.



Luckily, Daniela and I like the challenge of transforming vacuous, sterile spaces into liveable, often luxurious homes. She does the colour schemes and cushions while I fail to plumb in the washing machine. In fact, we've paid for wi-fi and a full Sky TV package at all the properties we've lived in.

After two years of umbrella protection under Texas the drug baron, as our time in the building was coming to an end, there was a knock at the door. Normally, I would open it to find a babbling addict thinking he was at the flat upstairs. One time, I got a mouthful from a distressed wife who had the wrong address and assumed I was the drug lord that had sent her husband into a stupor. This time, however, I greeted a well-to-do guy, dressed in a smart shirt and tie, sweating profusely and looking panicked.

"Have you seen Daniel?" he asked, barely catching breath, before correcting himself, "Not Daniel, Texas! The guy upstairs? Do you know if he's OK?"

I said I'd seen him the day before, and suddenly a look of relief came over his face. "He's my brother," he said, calming down. "I look out for him."

And he climbed into a shiny car that stood out in the street lined with old bangers. Looks are often deceiving, and I had not for one moment considered that this drug lord could have come from a similar background to myself.

My relationship with Texas — and many of the other unexpected people I met — was possible only because of my life as a guardian. Most of us, in our everyday lives, stare at the pavement when confronted with those who seem to be living at society's edge. As a guardian, you often have to look these people in the eye. Invariably, they are never as strange or as intimidating as you thought they might be. When you live in the

plans to turn it into a public lido.

An old bathroom had to be quarantined off after a sewer pipe explosion, so it quite literally became a shower of... you get the idea. All this we endured before we discovered the torrents of mice that fell like holy rain from every cupboard, corner and sideboard. According to a suspiciously knowledgable neighbour, the room where I slept had previously been the nucleus of an illicit brothel (there was me thinking I had brought the erotic charge into the room).

The small mud mound that served as a garden was littered with syringes, not shrubs. It turned out that the flat above was a drug den, and a successful one at that. Within a week of moving in, I met the drug lord himself. He introduced himself to me as "Texas", and once lent me his vacuum cleaner. It was only when he handed over a pristine Dyson Ball that I realised how dangerous this man was, and how much cash there was to be made in narcotics.

Yet one way or another, we settled in. Daniela laid down turf in the back yard and miraculously built a tiered flowerbed out of bits of shattered armchair. Meanwhile, I scaled the fence and liberated a large sign from next door's derelict tabernacle. "By the Grace of God" it declared, as it stared down dolefully at us, like the bespectacled eyes of Dr TJ Eckleburg in The Great Gatsby.

ALL MOD CONS
Bayfield basks in the sun outside the former sheltered housing unit that he rented beneath a drug den in east London in 2015

One day, when the sun was out and there was nothing better to do, we treated ourselves to a decadent lunch. A metropolitan liberal elite feast was lovingly prepared: buffalo mozzarella, beef tomatoes, bread with chunks of fruit in it. We were just settling in a dappled corner of the garden, Daniela drizzling everything in expensive olive oil, when suddenly the sound of the ⋙→

cracks, you get to know the grit.

When our contract finally came to an end, Daniela and I moved from impoverished Newham to salubrious Maida Vale. For a year we lived the high life as the sole occupants of a vast community centre on the road where Chrissie Hynde lives. Our bed was mounted on the stage, where I presume nativity plays were performed in the hall's heyday. At nightfall we would close the set of dusty curtains and hunker down because the room was too large to heat. It was mid-January.

Eventually, we were given our marching orders and sent to Burnt Oak, north London, to live in an old register office. I lived, slept and worked out of the room where hundreds of couples had tied the knot. Day one, the building's alarm system went berserk, so I ripped it off the wall, which set off more alarms, and within minutes the police turned up clutching Tasers and shouting at me to drop to the floor. Most mornings I was woken by confused mothers wanting birth certificates, wondering why the registrar was wearing jogging pants and had Weetabix dribbling down his chin.

After that stint, we ended up where I live now, in another timeworn care facility in Barnet, north London. In its day, this property was the first of its kind, specially built for people living with multiple sclerosis. Now it's rundown and full of construction workers, a writer, an actor and a painter and decorator.

Over the years, these unexpected encounters with our shared social history have been a sobering contrast to my often carefree existence amid the mould and the mice. Looking back, I realise that the buildings I have stewarded all hold some wider significance, and are bound by a single theme — social unrest.

Back in Tottenham, I was pepper-sprayed one night by a gang of tweens from the housing estate next door to our retirement home. It was here, in 1985, that a series of riots across England came to a brutal conclusion with the murder of PC Keith Blakelock.

Putting my keys into the door at the sheltered accommodation unit in Newham, my eyes were drawn to a memorial plaque inscribed with the name of PC Nina Mackay. In 1997, while attempting to arrest a paranoid schizophrenic man holed up in the flat upstairs, she became the first female officer to be killed in active duty in 13 years.

TAKE YOUR PICK
Above: collecting apples to make cider in the garden of a care home in Barnet. Left top: the kitchen in Barnet. Left bottom: the back of the register office in Burnt Oak, complete with "private pool"

In the Maida Vale community centre, I would stare up at one particular tower block that loomed against the skyline — Grenfell. Only weeks after we left, it become a tragic symbol of a society in crisis, and by the time we reached the register office, just as Brexit referendum fever took hold, we found ourselves living within a largely Romanian and Turkish community whose members were trying to get a grip on why it was that they no longer felt welcome.

Guardianships aren't just available in London and other large cities. In Great Yarmouth, where I am from, there is an old retirement home that is currently looked after by guardians, and you sometimes hear of vacancies at buildings such as hotels and even castles in the countryside.

Since I became a guardian, I've never had a full-time job and I have never paid more than £450 a month in rent. Now, though, all of this seems to be changing. Along with regular price increases, I've noticed that the profile of guardians themselves is shifting. Go back six years and this unconventional model of living was practised almost exclusively by young creatives struggling for cash and purpose in London. Those heady days of bohemian youth culture that were synonymous with guardian life have fallen away and the sector is becoming more regulated. In October, the first trade association for property guardian firms was formed — The Property Guardian Providers Association (PGPA) — which aims to drive up safety and standards and foster best practice.

The majority of people I have lived with since those days have been migrant workers or public health workers. With a property guardian's average yearly income estimated to be £24,800, it seems that a strange, new and eclectic underclass exists, made up of cash-strapped freelancers, hard-working immigrants and we few struggling artists still plugging on through the sludge.

Now, about two-thirds of the people I live with are European. In the midst of the Brexit chaos, I find it comforting that every "foreigner" I've lived with — builders, bus drivers, nurses and practically all the other professions that keep us ticking along — has been nothing but kind, compassionate and absurdly hard-working. Most are living miles from home, and whatever money they make is always being sent back to keep a family afloat.

I fear that the success of guardianship schemes is too often reliant on inequality and exploitation. If the agencies' prices continue to climb, I worry they will just become snakes eating their own tails; pricing out their low-wage customer base with a mixture of hubris and greed.

My parents have backed me at every turn on this slightly surprising road. They have helped me decorate each property and have even slept for a few nights amid the general squalor on a carpet that reeked of stale urine. I don't have plans to return to normal accommodation soon — I'll be a guardian for as long as it takes for me to be able to pay rent, go on holiday and occasionally eat out without being bankrupted ■

Our bed was on the community centre stage, where nativity plays took place in the hall's heyday