



CUT PRICE: Paula Hoogerbrugge is billed by Greenbelt for maintenance

Latter-day lairds and their £12,500 patch of grass...

One of the first acts of the devolved Scottish Parliament a decade ago was to pass a land reform act to free communities from the arbitrary governance of the hated lairds by allowing them to buy the freehold of their homes.

Yet 50,000 people who have bought new homes in Scotland and the north of England over the past decade have found themselves bound to a different kind of 'laird' - a property-management company called the Greenbelt Group.

It was set up by Strathclyde Council, Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Natural Heritage in the early Nineties as a not-for-profit company to manage the common areas of new housing estates.

For Strathclyde Council it was a way of getting the residents of new estates to pay for the upkeep of grassy areas and playgrounds. Developers would sell common areas of their estates to the Greenbelt Group, and place covenants on homes to allow the company to collect charges.

Five years ago, the company was privatised in a management buyout. Since then, it has expanded nationwide and appears to be making tidy profits - tidier, indeed, than some of the estates.

One dissatisfied customer is Paula Hoogerbrugge, a public relations executive who owns one of 40 homes on a seven-year-old estate in Livingston, West Lothian. 'Shortly after I moved in I received a letter informing me that Greenbelt had bought some small areas of open space on the estate and would be billing me £140 a year for maintenance,' says Paula, 41.

'It soon became evident that very little work was being done. I tried to contact the company to complain and found it almost impossible to get a response.'

She then put a notice in the local paper asking if anyone else had had a similar experience - and was inundated with replies suggesting Greenbelt had achieved the near impossible: make council tax look relatively good value. On one estate, homeowners were being charged a total of £12,500 a year to maintain a 10m-long patch of grass and narrow strip of woodland. And the grass was not even being cut. 'People were paying and getting no service,'

By Ross Clark

says Jim Devine, Labour MP for Livingston, who has taken up the issue. 'If they didn't pay they received threatening letters.'

Just the type of case, one might imagine, for consumer organisation Which? to investigate - except that one Which? director, Tony Burton, is also a director of Greenbelt. He was 'unavailable' for comment.

Managing director of Greenbelt Group Alex Middleton said: 'I don't think there are that many unhappy people. We've got a very good relationship with many residents. A lot don't like the responsibility of owning the land with the liabilities it can bring.'

One of the case studies on Greenbelt's website is Mid Duloch, a development of 107 homes in Dunfermline where resident Kate Peattie is fed-up with the service she pays £180 a year for.

'Our deeds state Greenbelt is supposed to cut the grass 16 times each summer,' says Kate, 43. 'Last year they did so only four times. They are supposed to replace dead trees and bushes, but they haven't.'

A Greenbelt spokesperson said its contractor on that site has recently been replaced. Nevertheless, the case highlights a weakness in the law. While owners of leasehold flats have the right to sack their management company - or buy a share of their freehold - owners of freehold houses subject to covenants have no such right.

Greenbelt, along with other companies involved in the same work, can charge homeowners however much they like forever.

In December, Greenbelt said it will, after all, consider voluntarily allowing residents to take on maintenance of the common parts of the estates, and in some instances may even consider selling them the land. However, it will only do so if there is unanimous agreement among residents - something extremely hard to achieve in a housing estate of 100 properties.

It is not enough for Devine. He is meeting the Government in February to demand legislation to give freeholders the right to sack management companies or buy common parts of their estate.

The days of latter-day lairds may be numbered.

How a gifted amateur was so successful in creating a stunning £2.5m mansion, he's now gone into business as a full-time developer

I self-built a business empire

By Mark Hughes-Morgan

Self-builders like to have their work admired but for a couple in Hemel Hempstead the praise was so great, including an eco-building award, that they decided to go into the upmarket development business full-time.

Anthony and Julie Hayes finished The Grange back in May. The house is an impressive six-bedroom mansion whose overall design owes much to Julie's admiration of the work of the architect Edwin Lutyens, and cost them a total of £1.5 million.

'We have had offers up to £2.5 million since then,' says Anthony.

When the house was first proposed, there were howls of protest from the neighbours. 'They didn't want the disruption, or the change,' says Anthony, 47, a former military police bodyguard and private security consultant.

The Hayeses spent £995,000 on the plot, and £600,000 demolishing the rather unattractive Sixties house that stood on it. And once they had finished the house, the offers started rolling in - even though it had not formally been put on the market.

Encouraged by the interest, they have decided to put it up for sale now and build similar admirable properties for themselves and others. 'It worked really well for us, we came in bang on budget, and we can't wait to do another one,' says Anthony.

As well as eyeing up another upmarket property for demolition and rebuild in Berkhamsted, the Hayeses have already started building two other large houses, close to Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, which are due to be completed in the next few months.

They have had the property bug since 1998. 'We started with nine renovations in six years,' says Anthony. By 2004, their renovations had helped make them mortgage-free in a £1.5 million house in Hemel, with two rental properties.



GRANGE FINDER: Self-build eco-house The Grange - inspired by the work of Edwin Lutyens - came in on budget and was finished in just 14 months

When trouble at the security firm ADT led to him losing his franchise, Anthony decided to put his redundancy and the proceeds of his house into building on a garden plot in Hemel. It followed a tip-off from estate agents Aitchisons. 'A similar scheme nearby had won planning permission so we were confident they would do the same with us.'

Bizarrely, a representative from the Royal Bank of Scotland contacted him after spotting his planning application and asked whether he was looking for funding. The offer was too good to miss and enabled Anthony to be far more ambitious.

'I ended up buying ten gardens in the same street at £60,000 each,' he says. It was a classic case of in-too-deep-too-quick. He was hit by one disaster after another. The weather was awful, then came the Buncefield refinery explosion nearby, and for several days the workmen couldn't do anything. But because of the builders' contract, Anthony was obliged to pay them whether they could work or not, and by the time the ten houses were built and sold, he hadn't made a penny. 'In fact, I lost £110,000,' he says.

anyone wants to see what we do, we can bring them here.'

Inside there is a double-height dining area, playroom, drawing room and large kitchen/breakfast room. On the first floor is an impressive master bedroom suite with a dressing

room and en suite, as well as two more bedrooms and a staircase to the top floor, which has a further two bedrooms and another bathroom.

The services are 21st Century with underfloor heating downstairs and traditional radiators upstairs powered by a bio-mass, woodchip-powered boiler which won Anthony's fledgling company, Frithsden Construction, a regional sustainable development award from the Federation of Master Builders. 'It's zero carbon, saves 14,000kg of carbon

dioxide a year and our fuel costs are £700, as opposed to £2,200 with gas.'

Anthony is most proud of the fact that despite his uncompromising approach, the house came in exactly on budget and, even though the two six-bedroom, four-bathroom houses

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CAREER BUILDING: Anthony and Julie Hayes in their kitchen with sons Joshua, left, and Max

INSIDE JOB: Julia's interior design skills learned with Laura Ashley are shown off in the drawing room, above

he is building at Hemel Hempstead are not yet finished, he is keen to start on an even bigger project - a £2.5 million house which he will demolish, rebuild for £850,000 and sell for £3.9 million.

'This town is in a bubble: it has great schools, it is close to London, is really popular and has loads of character,' he says.

The estate agent brokering that next deal, Tom Leech of Regent Estates, is slightly more sanguine about the Berkhamsted effect.

'It is a very popular town but we feel the hard times, too,' he says. 'You have to know your market really well which, to his credit, Anthony seems to. It changes all the time. Once a home cinema was the necessity; now, offering sustainable features such as the bio-mass boiler is a genuine plus.'

'There is a great shortage of property at all levels in the town,' adds Clive Mosson of Aitchisons. 'At the top end there are really very few substantial houses of any kind. The demand is always there.'

For more information about The Grange and Frithsden Construction, call 01442 866221.



RELIC: The Hayeses knocked down this Sixties house to make way for The Grange

The next big thing...



ON THE UP: The Hayeses' new projects are under way with two more large houses close to Hemel Hempstead

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