

TIMES ONLINE

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A guide to househunting on the web

Househunting goes high-tech: technology is transforming the way we search for our next home. Our buyers test-drive top property websites

[Peter Conradi and Helen Davies](#)

After weeks of looking in vain for their dream home, John and Jane Smith spot a contender while driving down a leafy suburban street. A solid late-Victorian terrace, it appears to be in a reasonable condition and, as far as they can tell from the street, has a decent-sized back garden for the children. As John slows the car, Jane reads a few digits off the estate agent's board outside and taps them into her iPhone.

Seconds later, full details of the property, including floor plans, a video podcast of the interior and the estate agent's details, have been pinged back to her. The message contains useful local information, too: council-tax rates, a list of cafes and restaurants, even league tables for the schools.

The couple text back to arrange a viewing. They make an offer and, in the weeks that follow, they monitor the progress of their sale by logging on to a secure website.

Science fiction? Far from it. The various features that help our hypothetical couple are all already being used, to varying extents, by some of the more sophisticated estate agents. Within a few years, they could be commonplace for anyone buying property.

At the heart of the changes, of course, is the internet. Gone are the days when people's property searches invariably began with a nose pressed against an estate agent's window. For many, the starting point is instead the internet, and one of the many portals that allow you to search properties marketed by various agencies by size, price and location.

Biggest of the bunch, at least according to the number of properties on its books, is [Rightmove](#). It had more than 980,000 for sale in the UK in August 2007, according to a study by the City analyst Clear Capital – about three times as many as each of its main rivals, [FindaProperty.com](#), [Primelocation](#) and [Propertyfinder.com](#). The sites all work on the same principle, charging agents a fee to post properties and encouraging users to register (providing agents with a useful list of leads in the process).

This week, they have a new rival, Globrix (www.globrix.com; the firm is part-owned by News International, parent company of The Sunday Times). This site works in a different way: rather than charging agents to list, it uses "spidering" technology to crawl the web, collecting information from estate agents' own sites. Daniel Lee, 40, Globrix's founder, says it already links to more than 500,000 properties – and the figure is growing quickly.

Lee, an expert in computer search with a PhD from Warwick in computational fluid dynamics, was looking around in 2005 for a new area to apply his skills, and he and co-founder, Ian Parry, hit on property. Existing websites, they thought, were rather old-fashioned. Their inspiration was Google: "If you're a website, you don't have to pay to appear on Google," he says. "That's been a successful model."

More important for the user, Globrix makes it possible to search not just by location or number of bedrooms, but according to other detailed criteria such as era (Georgian, Victorian or modern), outside space (balcony, roof terrace or garden, south-facing or not) and whether it has wooden floors, original fireplaces or a swimming pool. To see how the sites compare, see the panels.

"When you look for a home, you don't merely say, 'I want a two-bed flat for £300,000'," Lee says. "Behind that simple message is a more complex set of desires. You might want a period house, or a garage, even a tennis court. There are a whole load of criteria."

With the web come all sorts of other possibilities. Most of the portals contain other local information: Rightmove and Primelocation, for example, offer buying guides, market reports and more. Globrix plans to include school league tables and Land Registry data showing the prices at which properties have changed hands.

Lee doesn't want to overdo it, though. "We want to be an access point that passes people through to other sites, so simplicity is best," he says. "Look at Google, the most successful website in the world – it is easy to use and uncluttered."

Although most people's property searches begin with the internet, often – as for our hypothetical buyers – they can be set off by the glimpse of an estate agent's board. [Douglas & Gordon](#), an agency active in west and southwest London, offers a service that allows people passing a property to text a dedicated number and have details of the property, including floor plans, texted back to them. It will also send a list of other homes in the area.

"So many people say they want to know the details of a property right away when they go past it," says Ed Mead, a director of the firm. "Rather than ringing up the agency, it is much simpler and quicker to text." The service, introduced on a fee-paying basis in 2006, has been free since the start of last year.

Douglas & Gordon has another service, called My Property Tracker, that allows clients to log on to its website and, after entering a password, check how much interest their property is attracting – and even receive feedback from viewings.

So, what kind of property information can you receive on your phone, mobile device or, more realistically for most of us, home computer? Estate agents' websites began as little more than internet versions of the traditional card in the window – a few particulars and a photograph or two. Even today, many of the smaller, less sophisticated ones remain just that.

Others, however, have turned themselves into veritable multimedia experiences. "The web is the first port of call now for almost everyone looking to buy or rent," says Leo Lapworth, web manager for [Foxtons](#), a high-profile agency, active in London and Surrey, that has made a name for itself with its branded Minis and plush, cafe-style offices.

"Some people are serious; some are just curious. We now have an interactive floor plan for every property: you can zoom in and out, move the mouse over rooms and see photos, description, sizes and a 360-degree tour if there is one available. For some, you can also get

an audio description. You could make it whizzier, but it is about using technology without throwing it in anyone's face. You have to make it as usable as possible, so we link some of the properties to Google Earth or currency converters, for example."

Still can't quite visualise what your prospective dream home is really like? Many agencies now offer property podcasts – mini video films – on their sites.

"Interest has exploded in the past four months," says Lee Helliard, managing director of the London-based [Real Property Tours](#), which produces videos for agencies such as [Knight Frank](#), [WA Ellis](#), [Banbury Ball](#), [Aylesford](#) and [Chesterton](#). "Every big estate agent in London seems to be coming round to it. It is as if someone flicked a switch and the mindset changed."

The company's tours, which last from 90 seconds to three minutes or more, and vary in sophistication, are especially popular with overseas buyers. The actress Gillian Anderson, for example, reportedly bought a house in Bloomsbury, central London, after viewing a video from Los Angeles, then visiting in person.

"Most of the tours have a music background that we tailor to the property on offer," Helliard says. "So, a penthouse at Chelsea Bridge Wharf may have a more bluesy and jazz soundtrack, whereas a classical country house will have Vivaldi or Brahms. But agents are beginning to inquire about doing voiceovers and guiding the viewer through the tour." Some enterprising vendors make their own videos and post them on websites such as [MySpace](#) and [YouTube](#) – although the results are often amateurish and can attract scathing reviews from others using the site.

Podcasts come into their own for British-based buyers looking for a holiday or investment property abroad: a film showing not just a development, but also the surrounding area, can be a valuable tool for the new brand of investors thinking of buying in Belize, Bulgaria or another far-flung country they have never visited. To buy merely on the basis of such a film would be little short of foolhardy – but it can allow potential buyers to draw up a shortlist.

And if the development has not yet been completed? Just as films such as *Beowulf* and *The Golden Compass* mix animation seamlessly with reality, so a combination of sophisticated computer graphics and real-life footage can give potential buyers an idea of what a resort complex will be like once it is finished.

In a further twist, TTA, a property public-relations company based in London, has used [Second Life](#), a online virtual world with millions of subscribers, to build representations of several projects. Neptune Land, for example, took potential buyers, local councillors and journalists on a "tour" of a development in Cheltenham before it was built.

Alex Lawrie, a director of TTA, says it first used the site for clients wanting to make virtual models of projects to help with planning applications. "Now it is being used for developments, especially mixed-use ones," he says. "We are saying to clients, 'You would be living above a shop, and this is how it would look.'" Lawrie expects the slowdown in the housing market to encourage the spread of such virtual innovations. "It is going to be a tough market this year, and people want low-cost, effective ways to reach buyers," he says. "A traditional brochure for a development costs £6,000-£24,000. We can do a podcast for £3,000, and it provides a way for people to track buyers when they download it."

There are limits, however. Although the advent of digital technology has dramatically brought down the cost of shooting video, even the most basic short film is likely to come in at several hundred pounds, and a professionally made one several times that – which means you are unlikely to see one any time soon for a £150,000 flat.

There are also privacy issues: owners of multimillion-pound London homes or country houses may be reluctant to post videos of their property for all to see – prospective burglars included.

“Although most sales have a glossy brochure, with numerous pictures and a floor plan, there is something about a video tour that makes it feel more invasive,” says Rupert Sweeting, head of the country-house department at Knight Frank. “You also cannot blur or remove any objects of particular value in a virtual tour.”

As Sweeting points out, those same security concerns surfaced a few years ago, when agents started to produce floor plans – which are now commonplace. As a compromise, some agents allow videos to be seen only by selected clients, by e-mailing them out, burning them onto CDs or putting them on a password-protected website.

Rather than simply viewing a house on your computer screen, it could one day be possible to put on a virtual-reality helmet and “walk” through the property – perhaps even enjoying the artificially created aromas of freshly ground coffee and baking bread.

So, what do such innovations mean for estate agents? For industry-watchers, one of the most notable features of the past decade has been the ability of the old familiar names to maintain their dominance despite the march of new technology. While traditional booksellers and electrical retailers have lost a chunk of their market share over the past decade to Amazon and co, the property world has been far more resistant to change.

Admittedly, several internet-based vendors, such as My Property for Sale, have sprung up, offering private buyers the chance to publicise properties in return for a flat fee. For £99, My Property for Sale will list your home on its site, with unlimited photographs, handle telephone inquiries and even deliver a forsale board. Its rival, HouseWeb, has packages from £47.

Tesco has also been dabbling in the market – although it got off to an awkward start when it was obliged in October to suspend the private-sales section of its property website, launched three months earlier, after being warned by the Office of Fair Trading that it was acting as an estate agent under the terms of the 1979 act that regulates the industry. It says it is now considering launching a fully fledged online agency.

Yet the overwhelming majority of property deals are still handled by the traditional high-street names. In fact, the number of agencies has rocketed – largely because of the growing pool of fee income prompted by the dramatic rise in property prices over the past decade. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that, as of September last year, 201,490 people were “involved in real estate acting on a fee or contract basis” – up 74% from a decade ago.

Patrick Dixon, who advises several multinational companies on global trends and risk management, says that estate agents will have to up their game if they want to survive. “At the moment, agents can get away with a couple of pictures, but in the future, they will need 50,” says Dixon, best known for his book *Futurewise*.

“People will want to see views from every window, and images of the street, to get a sense of the atmosphere of the neighbourhood. YouTube-style video clips will become commonplace, as will 3-D walk-through simulations for new homes and off-plan sales.”

Yet there are limits, Dixon says. “People want to touch property – to stand on those floors, feel the work surfaces in the kitchen, turn door handles, breathe the air, go outside into the garden and listen for traffic or aircraft, poke their noses into local shops, look over fences at neighbours’ gardens to see if the area suits. For all these reasons, the final viewing of main residences will not change.”

Mead agrees. “All this helps to give people a taste for what they are looking for,” he says, “but, unlike a car or computer, a house is bought with emotion, not with price. In the end, people will always need to set foot in a place if they want to buy it.”

www.mypropertyforsale.co.uk; www.houseweb.co.uk

Additional reporting by Lucy Denyer

The first-time buyer

Who: Lucinda Lovelace, 27, a self-employed fashion stylist. She lives in her parents’ flat in Pimlico.

What she’s looking for: A two-bedroom flat or a one-bedder with a light, open-plan area from which to operate her business. Lovelace is looking in Pimlico, Notting Hill (budget permitting) and Shepherd’s Bush. “I don’t want to be south of the river,” she says.

The key features any property must have are enough space to entertain, plenty of natural light and residents’ parking. She would also like to be near local amenities such as a supermarket. “A south-facing property would be great,” Lovelace says, “and a large main bedroom with lots of cupboard space would be a bonus. I would like somewhere quiet and not too near any main roads, and I don’t want ex-council.” She has up to £500,000 to spend.

The verdict: “Websites are great for having an initial look at what’s out there, and finding out whether my requirements are reasonable for my budget,” she says. When she started searching, some features in particular on several of them stood out. “I liked Globrix, because the advertising didn’t distract from the search,” she says. “And I really liked its little price scale – it is fun and useful. I think it has the most innovative kind of search – you can search for a roof terrace or anything you like.”

Rightmove also got the thumbs up, because it is easy to navigate and to start a search. Primelocation looks smart, Lovelace says, “but every time I clicked on something else, it kept on asking me to sign up for e-mail alerts, which stalled my search”.

Propertyfinder seemed more like a general property website, and it wasn’t immediately clear how to start searching. Findaproperty, however, was not specific enough. “It came up with properties in Vauxhall or Stockwell when I typed in Pimlico.”

Did she find anything? Yes. “There are a couple of flats in Notting Hill that I’m going to have a look at,” Lovelace says. “I thought I was punching above my weight, but things did come up.”

The co-buyers

Who: Sarah Hartley, 24, who works for a crane-hire company in Harrogate, North Yorkshire, and her brother Charlie, 23, employed by a publishing company, also in Harrogate. They have decided to team up, as Sarah doesn't want to live on her own, and have between £250,000 and £300,000 to spend.

What they're looking for: A two-bedroom house or flat in Harrogate. They would like a modern property that is ready to move into. Absolute no-nos are old and run-down properties with bad decor. They would like to be within walking distance of the town centre. "We would like a garden," Sarah adds.

The verdict: "It was helpful to look at the different sites, and it did give me a good idea of the properties in my area that are on the market," Sarah says. Some, however, were better than others. Rightmove, for example, was easy to use, but Sarah found it hard to narrow her search, which meant it came up with 100 properties – far too many, especially since many were in nearby villages, while she wants to be within half a mile of the city centre.

Primelocation was better at helping her to be more specific, but the site was slow to load, and its layout meant property details were squashed. Having to fill in a form each time she wanted more information on a property was also "a waste of time", Sarah adds. Findaproperty was "brilliant to use", she says, but again hard to narrow down, and Propertyfinder also failed in its ability to narrow a search.

Globrix got the thumbs up. "I like the fact that you can narrow your search even down to wooden floors," Sarah says. "It threw up 12 properties, and they were just what I was looking for. This was the most useful of all the sites, and you can contact the agent about each house and even book an evaluation on the property."

Did they find anything? "There are quite a few properties I like and will have a look at," Sarah says. "But we're waiting for the right house, so we're not in a huge rush."

The young family

Who: David Benson, 32, a project manager, his wife, Caroline Johnson, 33, and their daughter, Niamh, eight months. They live in a two-bedroom cottage in a small village just outside Cambridge.

What they're looking for: David and Caroline would like to move to a bigger property, as they want to enlarge their family. They are undecided, however, about whether to continue living in a village or move to Cambridge city centre, which would be easier for travelling to London, where David sometimes commutes for work.

"We're torn," he says. "We quite like living in a village, but we miss the ability to pop out and go to a pub or a restaurant. If it was the right place in the town centre, with enough green space, that would be fine."

They are looking for a four-bedroom detached property with at least two bathrooms, and would like a large garden, a conservatory and a modern kitchen, although "a renovation opportunity would be interesting", David says. Space for working from home is key, and they would like to be near a good local school. Properties on housing estates are nonos. The couple have a budget of about £500,000.

The verdict: "The process of looking for property online has always been a tricky one," David says. "I usually use Rightmove, Primelocation and Propertyfinder, but I find them all

frustrating, as they do not have all of the properties, and tend to be messy sites with too much information that is not useful. And Primelocation is really annoying when it asks you to register.” That said, he liked the full-list function on the site, and found the keyword search helpful.

Rightmove was easy to use, says David, and the site came up with a decent amount of properties. Propertyfinder and Globrix both got the thumbs up because they allow users to click through directly to an agent’s site. David was also impressed by the way Globrix lists properties on a single page. “I really like the fact that the site is clean and simple to use,” he adds.

Did they find anything? “There were some interesting properties out there, but nothing that quite fitted the bill,” David says. “We will keep looking.”

The London exiles

Who: Richard Edridge, 40, his wife, Sarah, 33, and their daughters, Alice, 4, and Emily, 2. They live in a four-bedroom, end-of-terrace 1970s townhouse in Strawberry Hill, just outside Twickenham.

What they’re looking for: The Edridges want a bigger home, outside London, and are looking around Winchester. Sarah used to teach there, and the fast train links into London mean Richard can still commute to Canary Wharf, where he works as a lawyer. They want a detached house with at least four bedrooms and a large garden, for £600,000-£900,000.

“There are certain things on which we are unwilling to compromise,” Sarah says. “We don’t want to live on a main road, under a flight path or on a flood plain. We want a detached property with off-street parking.”

The verdict: Rightmove and Findaproperty came top of Sarah’s list. Both had plenty of information on local council-tax bands, transport links and schools – even Ofsted reports. “Both sites brought up seven and eight houses respectively – a manageable amount of property to look at quickly,” she says.

Propertyfinder, Primelocation and Globrix did not fare so well. “I couldn’t get a narrow search on Propertyfinder, and there were some really annoying noises. The site sends you to individual agent’s websites, which is okay, but you can’t guarantee that every agent will have a map or a floor plan of the property.” Primelocation was difficult to search because it asks you to register and log on. Both sites also showed properties already under offer.

“Globrix was the worst by far. I found it extremely difficult to use – the sliding scale at the top of the page kept jumping back and forth, and choosing the number of bedrooms was confusing. Although it came up with 13 properties, a lot of them were a long way outside Winchester.”

Did they find anything? “The only property that fitted the bill was a house that I then found was under offer. Most properties were too far out of the city centre. But I’m going to carry on looking.”

Interviews by Lucy Denyer

Do your research

If you are considering a move, then become your own online search agent: you will be surprised how much you can find out with the aid of the internet.

- If a particular property has caught your eye, study the photographs and floor plans posted on the agent's website, and take an interactive tour. If it is an area that has taken your fancy, streamline your options, narrowing your search to particular streets or a specific postcode.
- Don't rely on national surveys to act as a barometer of the local market. Instead, do your own detailed research. For a rough valuation of properties in your target area, start at www.hometrack.co.uk. If a home has changed hands since 2000, you can find out the exact price paid for it, for a fee, at www.landreg.gov.uk and www.myhouseprice.com.
- Visit your local planning office's website or go to www.ukplanning.com to find out if any developments are proposed or approved that may affect your target area. Some may have benefits, but others could have the potential to drag prices down, so it pays to check thoroughly.
- You should also check the performance of the council in the area in which you are househunting. You can find out everything from tax rates to recycling fees at www.audit-commission.gov.uk. Click on "local government", on the right-hand side of the screen, then, on the left side of the next page, click "choose authority". A list of all councils will appear.