



Joseph Connolly

A monthly diary of sundry observations, brief encounters and anecdotes, local and less so, foodie and otherwise

How long must we suffer these subterranean homesick blues?

Some people, when you tell them you are on the verge of facing appalling disruption to your entire existence on earth because neighbours are threatening the infliction of a massive building project ... well some people will tell you not to worry too much: it won't be so bad. That you will get used to it.

These people either have never been forced to endure so great an enormity, or else they lie. The distortion to one's life is total – not just years of filth and shattering noise (although there is always that) but the aesthetic consideration of forever being in constant sight and smell of mud, machinery, rusted metal, polythene sheeting, waterlogged ditches, Porta-loos and yodelling workers. And if you happen to work from home ... well you don't any more, matey: that's finished. Impossible. Compensation ...? Don't be so damned stupid.

My ordeal began about three years ago: a youngish married couple – both architects – told me that in order to provide the ideal Hampstead home for their family, it was necessary to demolish the undistinguished 1950s house they had bought for a comparative song and start from scratch.

We are in a conservation area, and virtually all the adjacent neighbours doggedly lodged their useless protests with Camden. The fact that Camden granted permission is a given – when do they ever say no? – but in addition, permission was granted for a basement, sideways expansion, an extra floor and the removal of fine mature trees. You do rather



■ Compensation for the misery of basement developments? Don't be so stupid!

wonder quite what there is left to conserve. The time estimate for building work was one year: it took two. Two years to build a semi! And because the architect owners architected it, naturally there is no trace of architectural motif or embellishment. Just wilfully odd angles, grey plastic drainpipes and the blank stare of plate glass windows: looks like it was cobbled together from a job lot of oddments: Kenwood House it ain't.

It is hard to convey the brutality of invasion and upheaval of nearby demolition and excavation: the lady across the road had just emerged with her mental health

impaired from a three year building project right next door to her, and trembled at the prospect of more: she literally feared for her sanity. When piles were sunk for the creation of the basement, nineteenth century buildings, including my own, shook and rumbled alarmingly. Ornaments tumbled from shelves – but all this was completely okay because noise and tremor were 'well within guidelines'. The undertaking was eventually completed... and has now received an award for 'architectural excellence' – and if you saw it, you would know this to be the only truly comic factor in

this deeply depressing saga. And the ideal Hampstead home that the architects strove to provide for their family...? It is up for sale, at five-and-half million.

This sort of arrogance can't go on any longer without proper consideration for neighbours. There have to be time limits, with fines for overrunning them. Directly affected parties must be compensated for nuisance and loss of work, while permission for basements must routinely be denied. If this does not happen, such blatant rapacity will proliferate – simply because people can. As things stand, it is, quite literally, a shame.

Girl with ice cream cones evokes sweet memories

A very lovely sight in Belsize last week: a beautiful young girl, long hair streaming, and pedalling a tricycle fronted by a big icebox filled with lollies and ice creams...! I thought they were extinct.

It reminded me of the days when I was a local prep schoolboy and nearly every day in summer

we saw this bloke, very smart in white jacket and peak cap,

tinkling the bell on a similar machine that was plastered with the slogan 'Stop Me And Buy One'. But here's the thing: whatever we did to attract his attention, the bugger never stopped. Not once. Just sailed on by. So we couldn't buy one.

Instead we sloped off to the sweetshop in England's Lane and invested our sixpence in two liquorice pipes, four piccanninies (little black babies whose head you bit off), four flying saucers, a gobstopper and a couple of chews. It's not like that any more.



Was it worth the bother?

Overheard last week in a new Mayfair restaurant. Two young city boys – dark blue suits, white open-neck shirts: the usual.

"I earned one-and-a-half million last year".

"Really...?"

"Yeah."

"Well look ... don't let it get you down – things are bound to get better soon".

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel *Style* is published by Quercus in ebook and hardback.

They're all legging it along Oxford Street



Summertime ... and the leggings are easy.

I was in a taxi in Oxford Street (pictured left) the other week, and I swear that on one of the hottest days of the year, eight out of ten women were wearing trousers, or those black leggings so beloved of Max Wall.

It's rather odd, because people seem to go to Oxford Street solely to buy clothes, and yet everywhere is a sea of utility workwear. Men? Same old horrible grey t-shirts, jeans, stupid bouncy shoes and sportswear that they have been slouching around in for seemingly decades.

They all look as if they are on day release from somewhere particularly grim, or else have just come from giving the drains a damn good rodding.

Chill out at own convenience

In Chalk Farm there is a 'convenience store' called Shopoint. Not sure how you pronounce that – but here is no purveyor of lavatories, of course not: simply somewhere convenient. On their canopy is written 'Oyster. Off Licence. Chill Out' – so I've made a mental note to pop in there some time very soon. Bask in their air-conditioning while ordering a dozen Colchester Natives, with a bottle of Bollinger. Truly convenient.

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