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Some of us are trying to sleep

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Dogs, music, rows - or all three. Check noise levels before you buy, advises Nick Kettles

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If obnoxious boom-box boy-racers, whining dogs, or a couple incessantly arguing regularly disturb your idyll, take a leaf out of the book of the Ropers of Farley, Staffordshire. After living 100 yards from Alton Towers - and its hundreds of screaming roller coaster riders - for 25 years, last year Stephen and Suzanne Roper successfully challenged the park's owners, Tussaud's Theme Parks Ltd, to reduce the noise.

But should they have moved there in the first place? Well, 35 years ago, when they arrived, Alton Towers was better known for its gardens than for the Oblivion or Black Hole rides.

In our crowded island noise is fast becoming a major source of concern, as both an environmental pollutant, and a cause of illness. Peter Wakeham, director of the Noise Abatement Society, claims one woman even tried to commit suicide as a result of sleep deprivation from high-pitch train horns. 'There are torture weapons of noise that are quieter,' he says.

Potential sources of noise should not be ignored when researching a prospective property, to live or let. Home Information Packs should, from 2007, include any noise abatement notices issued on the property or immediate neighbours, but critics say this may simply lead to a decrease in complaints by homeowners fearful of devaluing their property.

In the meantime, Peter Bolton King of the National Association of Estate Agents suggests: 'Brief your solicitor to ask the seller formally, then if there is a problem you have got something in writing.'

But don't be shy of doing the detective work yourself - you may uncover grounds for renegotiating the price. Visit the property at different times in the day to assess ambient noise levels from neighbouring streets. You should also check a good Ordnance



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Survey map for proximity to railways, substations, and even hospitals.

Londoners can currently make use of the country's first web-based noise map, which may subsequently go nationwide.

Roger Tompsett from map creator Atkins Global says: 'At present the map only indicates road traffic noise at day and night but will indicate if a garden is quieter. In the future it will help you identify air traffic, railways, and industrial noise, although not, unfortunately, noisy neighbours.'

The map will introduce you to the world of decibels, which are calculated logarithmically. This means the intensity of noise increases exponentially. The front row of a Smashing Pumpkins concert is, at 110 decibels, about 100,000 times as loud as ordinary conversation, at 60.

Noise intensity is absolute; nuisance, however, is subjective. Quieter but persistent sounds can be equally grating. Russell Jervis, managing director of estate agent Haart says: 'The annoying electrical humming sound overhead cables make can be a real turn-off for buyers, pushing down the price of some houses by 10-15 per cent.'

This is also how local councils must view complaints about noise, because there is nothing in law to define an acceptable level. Moreover, for an abatement order to be served on a neighbour, the sound must be 'witnessed' and recorded with specialist equipment by the noise pollution officer.

Some innovative councils, such as Doncaster, require the noisemaker to listen to a recording of their noise as part of a mediation process.

Solutions for sounds from outside should focus on secondary glazing, while those heard through party walls can be limited by some sort of additional insulation, such as Acoustiblok. Made from reinforced, loaded vinyl, Acoustiblok is only 3mm thick, yet reduces sound by at least 19 decibels.

In the garden, ETS's Green Barrier - a sandwich of living green willow and rock wool - can reduce sound by at least 10 decibels. Used successfully at Gleneagles Hotel in Perthshire, it both shields and absorbs sound to avoid it being deflected elsewhere. But at £140 a sq m, it may be better suited to serious property developers, especially those responding to 'sale prevention orders' based on noise.

The Roman poet Juvenal complained about noise - 'How much sleep, I ask you, can one get in lodging here. The wagons thundering past, the shouts of draymen caught in traffic' - and it's clear human tolerance to noise is not improving. Let's just hope our concern for others is.

www.noiseabatementociety.com www.londonnoisemap.com



Keep it down

Sound levels in decibels

130 Threshold of pain

125 Train horn

100 Pneumatic drill at 5 metres

90 Heavy goods vehicles from pavement

70 Vacuum cleaner at three metres

40 Refrigerator humming at two metres

0 Threshold of hearing

How to complain

Approach your neighbour before your blood pressure rises. If they persist, keep a diary about the noise before contacting the local environmental health department. Recordings will help persuade the council to help, but can't be used in evidence. If the council doesn't agree that the noise is unacceptable, civil action is still possible.

