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PROPERTY SUPPLEMENT OF THE YEAR

# HOME

Travel  
INSIDE

I ❤️ THANNENT

Why the 'small nodule of erupted spleen' on the southeast tip of England is enjoying a genteel renaissance. By novelist (and resident) Maggie Gee **8**



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# Home Cover



**Bucket (and spade) list**  
**Ramsgate, left, Margate's Old Town, right, and Maggie Gee, below**



**Y**ou'll be lonely. Do you know anyone there?" our London friends said, disconcerted by news of our move to Ramsgate, in Thanet, on the southeast tip of England.

"Thanet? That's Thanatos. It means death, doesn't it?" a maths professor said. "That's the end of you, then."

I recalled that, in this newspaper, Camilla Long had described it as bilious, forlorn and desolate, and a "small nodule of erupted spleen". A widower acquaintance with time on his hands had his own ideas. "Getting yourself a nice little bungalow by the sea? Downsizing? Good idea, I'll come and see you." Help! Actually, my husband, Nick, and I were upsizing. If you move to Thanet from London, you can afford to. Property has

gone up in the years since we moved, but the relative values are still about the same: our three-storey, double-fronted late-Victorian terrace in Ramsgate cost less than half as much as we received for our far smaller London house.

Maybe I wanted new material, too. My latest novel is set in Thanet, a black comedy called *Blood*, whose physically huge and heroine, Monica, an unorthodox deputy head with an axe in the hall, is redeemed not just by tenderness for her pupils, but by her love for Thanet's wide, sparkling, uninhabited beaches. It's a feeling I share.

There is a received idea that it's not a good idea to move away, in later life, from what you know. However, we had lived in Kensal Rise too long: 26 years, in fact. Several of our neighbours had died, and after

you've watched that, you don't want the remaining neighbours to watch you. One evening, I said melodramatically to my husband: "Don't let me die in Doyle Gardens."

Actually, I just hungered for new horizons. Literally – more light than the crowded London skyline allows. Besides, the books were massing against us. Every wall in the London house had loaded bookshelves, but ominous piles crept towards us over the carpets. Like us, they needed room.

We looked at Thanet because we wanted sea and needed to be near London; the modest house prices were a bonus. With the surplus from our sale, we bought a compact studio in Bloomsbury: not much more than a hotel room, but just a 10-minute walk from St Pancras station and the fast train down to Ramsgate,

Broadstairs and Margate.

These are the three main towns in the so-called Isle of Thanet. It really

was once an island, cut off from Britain by the deep Wantsum Channel. In the 19th century, the new steamboats and railways made it a popular holiday destination for Londoners. With the 20th-century rise of European package holidays, there was a drastic decline, but for the past decade there has been a gentle resurgence: tourist numbers were up nearly 10% in 2017.

Broadstairs has mostly Victorian housing and narrow streets crowded with clarton-voiced Brits in summer, following in the footsteps of Charles Dickens. Families cover the sands of sheltered Viking Bay, with its wooden

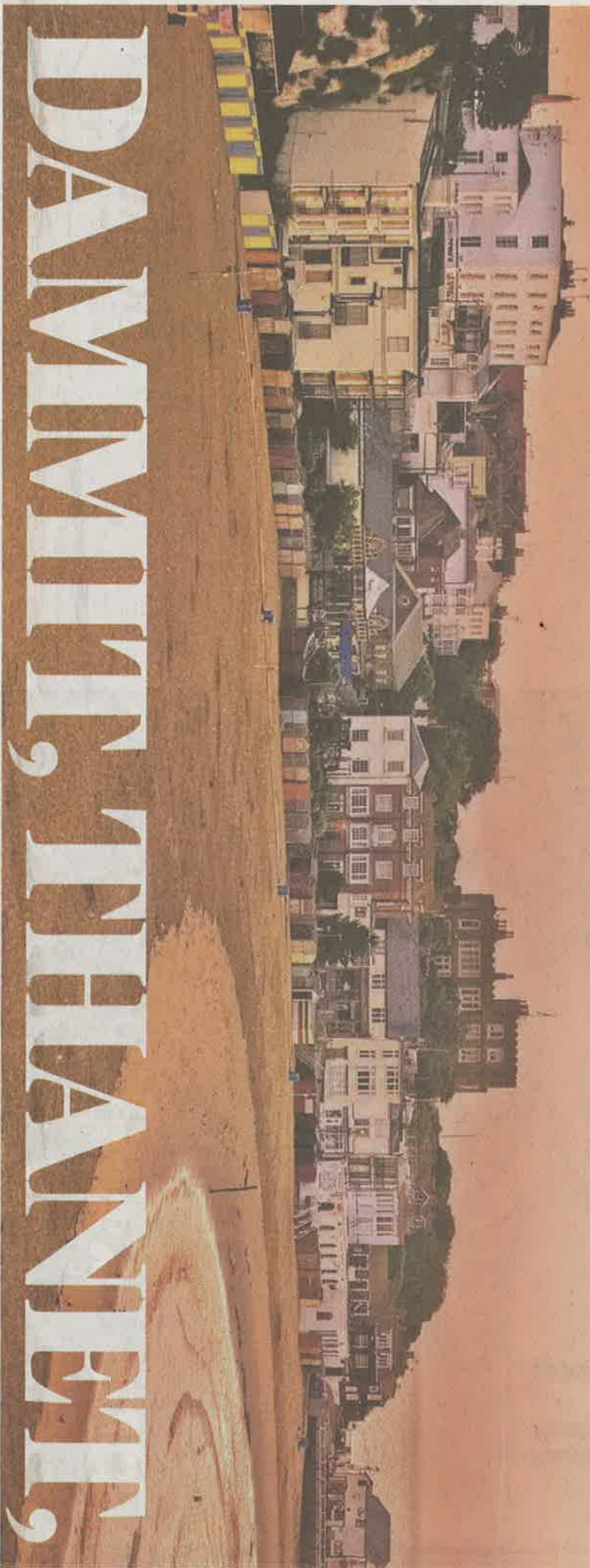


swingboats and old-fashioned Punch and Judy show; other visitors flock to the folk and food festivals.

Margate – larger, edgier – beckons the young and arty, especially since the arrival of the new Turner Contemporary art gallery in 2011, a modernist box showing, among others, Grayson Perry and Tracey Emin alongside sketches and watercolours by Turner. It had 2.8m visitors in its first seven years, and property in the nearby Old Town shot up in value, then steadied. TS Eliot was an earlier visitor to the town: the poet worked on *The Waste Land* on a bench by Margate Sands. Yet to us, Margate felt too split between the new urban rich and the rest, and

**This corner of Kent is much maligned, but its seaside towns and landscapes inspired Dickens, Coleridge, Turner and Van Gogh. Novelist Maggie Gee explains why she's become a convert**

Rising star Viking Bay, Broadstairs







ROD EDWARDS/GETTY IMAGES; BRIAN GIBBS/SIMON LEIGH/ALAMY

**BROADSTAIRS**  
Nine-bedroom Harbour Rise is tucked away under Bleak House (Charles Dickens's holiday home), in a prime sea-view spot just moments from the beach. **01227 451123**, [struttandparker.com](http://struttandparker.com)



**£17.5M**



**£159,950**

**MARGATE**  
In an ornate seatfront building on Royal Crescent, this one-bedroom flat on the lower ground floor would make a great weekender. It's an easy stroll to the trendy Old Town. **01843 231833**, [cookkeandco.com](http://cookkeandco.com)



**£899,995**

**RAMSGATE**  
There are views straight over the harbour from this four-bedroom Georgian house. The fireplaces and stained-glass windows have been restored by the owner. **01303 474101**, [grahamjohn.com](http://grahamjohn.com)



**£350,000**

**RAMSGATE**  
This mid-terrace house, on the west side of town, has five bedrooms and comes with planning consent to create a one-bedroom garden annexe. **01843 570500**, [milesandbarr.co.uk](http://milesandbarr.co.uk)

It's enjoyable to walk round the harbour on a calm night, the harbour lights winking, ink-black sea reflecting the moon

distant waves and passing boats. I feel happy.

Let's be honest, though, that's not what it was like when we arrived in 2012. On day one, we were suddenly in a place we knew very little, at the beginning of a hard winter, with no bookshelves. Ramsgate has some rougher parts, and when we ill-advisedly walked into town for a meal along King Street (at the time reminiscent of Hogarth's Gin Lane on Saturday nights, although the Ravensgate Arms has since gentrified), Nick said to me: "What kind of a place have you brought us to?"

All our old, easy, domestic routines needed to be learnt again. Three floors are very different from two: lots of time was spent in vertical transit. It took us time to discover Ramsgate's truly amazing, warm and faintly raffish social life of elaborate bohemian dinner parties in candlelit Georgian rooms; and until we found Andy Knight the carpenter, the books remained in boxes. But in the best Thanet spirit, Andy, who had "never done bookshelves" before, fitted good simulacra of Victorian woodwork to the sitting room and both studies, then retrofitted a crumbling brick shed in the garden and equipped it with oak floors, shelves and a damp-proof inner lining: *woliz!*, a small but delightful garden book room.

There are so many things we like about Ramsgate. Its

friendliness. The sense that people who move here share a love for its special, quirky magic. The sweeping curves of the roads that run down to the Royal Harbour (the only one in the country, by decree of George IV). Along the edge, beautiful arched doors in Victorian red brick open on cafes, pubs and galleries.

At Christmas, the yachts compete to deck themselves with fairy lights, on sails, masts and rigging, and the light show is reflected on the water. It's equally enjoyable to walk round the harbour on a calm summer night, with Smeaton's red-topped lighthouse on the western arm as the destination, the harbour lights winking, ink-black sea reflecting the moon. By day, if you walk at low tide along the chalky foot of the cliffs to Pegwell Bay (where, recent research suggests, Julius Caesar landed), you can spot caves, curlews and turnstones; or you can take the high cliff path, with tall yellow wild fennel, blackberries and views across gleaming mudflats towards Sandwich and Deal.

Thanet was loved and visited by 19th-century painters, poets and novelists. Now there is a new crowd of artists to discover, including the ceramist Vivienne Yankah, whose beautifully textured and mysterious small bowls and buoy-like objects gleam from our white furniture.

And, like Coleridge, we swim in the sea. His sea-bathes were daring – he loved big waves – but constrained by bathing machines. Nick and I just fill a flask of hot tea and walk about 400 yards to the nearest sandy beach. Five minutes later, we're swimming, winter and summer. Ramsgate is our home. We are so glad we made the move.

*Blood by Maggie Gee is out now (Fentim Press £9.99). See review in Culture, page 38*

over five floors and overlooking the sea. Some are run-down, can be bought relatively cheaply and would make amazing family homes; some are divided into flats; others have been beautifully maintained or refurbished, and their prices have climbed. Nelson Crescent and Paragon are less uniform but equally grand, with plaques commemorating Wilkie Collins and Charles Darwin, and views over the harbour towards the white cliffs of Dover. There are also two pretty, more intimately scaled Georgian terraces (Liverpool Lawn and Guildford Lawn), and a succession of attractive Georgian and Regency streets and squares: Sunny, open Spencer Square has tennis courts in the middle and a plaque for Vincent Van Gogh, who sketched the view towards the nearby cliff-top. Vale Square encloses private wooded gardens.

Drunk on all this affordable beauty and history, we put in an offer on an eight-bedroom house in Wellington Crescent, on the east cliff, where the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge stayed during his 10 summers in the town. Then, for a whole week, we both had vivid nightmares. We would be married to a listed building for ever. Chastened, we withdrew the offer. Instead, we fell in love with a spacious but unlisted property on the east cliff, on a quiet road, with five bedrooms, two of which we turned into studios. Georgian properties tend to have courtyards, but Ramsgate's Victorian houses have fair-sized gardens, in our case mature and stocked with the tropical palms and yuccas that do well in Thanet's sunny, windy climate. An artist had lived here: his conversion had brought in more light, but spared the Victorian fireplaces and cornices, and he had painted everything white, which seemed just right for our new life by the sea. Drinking my morning tea in bed, watching

