

Lord and Lady Norton are selling Fillongley Hall in Warwickshire. Their home is exactly the sort of place that prompted the Savills survey; a Greek-revival triumph with a wow factor that no amount of cantilevered glass walls could hope to replicate. There are three vast south-facing reception rooms (which can be opened up to create one great party space) and a marvellous, if slightly chilly, library.

There are 10 bedrooms, two thunderbox loos, and a large modern kitchen.

Tucked away in its own 400 acres, this house offers solitude within 15 minutes' drive of Birmingham airport and comes with an entrance lodge, four cottages and a cricket pitch. "This is a nationally important house, with accessibility to London and abroad," says Alex Lawson of Savills' country department. "And it's rare to be selling a house that is so authentic and unspoilt."

Until recently the sale of such a house, which has been in Lord Norton's family since it was built in 1824, would have been prompted only by the aforementioned trio of death, divorce, or debt. The eighth Lord Norton and his wife, Frances, however, are downsizing just because they feel like it. They plan to move with their three-year-old daughter, Alexandra, to Switzerland, where they met 16 years ago, and where they lived until James, 58, inherited the house and title in 1993.

They probably would have gone earlier, but first they wanted to renovate the house. "It was time for a bit of a revamp," says Norton, who has a loss-adjusting business in Kent.

"And it's pleasing when you look back and see you can pass everything on in whizz order. Frances is the colour lady; I am quite good at sorting out bits and pieces, and I inherited a good builder who knew the house." The house now has a new roof and has been replumbed and rewired. It has also been painted and papered top to toe, a not inconsiderable task accomplished by Lady Norton, who grew up in a house of similar size and spent years finding the right wallpapers and colours. Looking after the house, however, is a full-time job, and Lady Norton, 45, is not tempted to hang on to it.

"We've had fun doing it," she says. "Now it's superfluous to our needs. We are both free spirits and we are ready to get on with our lives."

Her husband agrees: "Selling is a simplification of one's life. Fillongley is a good place for children," he says, "and I enjoyed building dams and climbing trees here with my brother, but I've grown up a bit since then."

He points out that times have changed for everybody: "The tenants I have today stay two or three years; previously, they stayed for generations."

But they won't hand over to just anybody. "If nobody suitable comes along we won't sell," says Frances. "We've had fabulous times here and if Mr Frightful wants to buy, we won't be interested."

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