

MOVE

They carved out a career in the UK and now they're back on home turf. Linda Daly talks to expat agents

It was a failed bid to woo Sir Alan Sugar on *The Apprentice* that led Robbie Dillon to fall in love with London and find a career in estate agency. The year was 2008, the recession in Ireland was biting and Dillon found himself with itchy feet. He decided to apply for the BBC1 show and made it to the final round of auditions. His return to Ireland the next day was delayed when the radar went down at Dublin Airport so Dillon used his spare time to tour London, and was smitten.

He was working in IT for Merrill Lynch, the banking company, but he already had associations with estate agency: his mother, Mary Dillon, is chairwoman of Sherry FitzGerald. She suggested he apply for a job at Marsh & Parsons, the London company run by Irishwoman Liza-Jane Kelly and part-owned by Sherry FitzGerald at the time.

Dillon, who was 24, had to be interviewed, first. He impressed and received a call the same day offering him the job, but was told he had to be there in less than a week or it would be gone. After speaking to his parents – and getting a loan for the flight – he made the move.

"I soon understood why they wanted me there so quickly. It was so busy; September was wild. What I learnt in that week stood me in good stead for years and I fell in love with estate agency," he says.

In his decade at Marsh & Parsons, Dillon worked his way up from being a trainee negotiator to director of the company's Notting Hill office, in charge of lettings. In the meantime, he did a stint at the Holland Park office, and while there let out his priciest pad – a £19,000 (£21,700) a-week house in Holland Park – to fellow Irishmen U2, who were recording with producer Danger Mouse in 2011.

When Dillon moved to London, Ireland was in the throes of a recession and the property market was crashing hard. In contrast, London was filled with optimism, he recalls.

"On evaluation pitches, big, confident London men would say, 'Prices haven't come down since the Second World War, they're not coming down'. It was a really good time. Compare that with now, and it has been depressing. Since Brexit, it has been a car crash," he says.

Dillon, 34, and his new wife Georgy, decided to return to Ireland last year to settle down. "We lived in a top-floor flat, without a lift, so if kids came along it would be a struggle."

In January, he was appointed head of residential at Savills in Ireland, and he and Georgy put down a deposit on a new house in Terenure in Dublin.

"The most refreshing thing for me coming back is the way people look at estate agents here. It's really well respected; people are experts in their field. It's so pleasant, whereas in London you're considered a dime a dozen. You're looked down upon and regarded in the same vein as a clammer."

Savills, Dillon's new employer, has seen an upsurge in returning emigrants applying for jobs. Andrew Smyth, of the estate agency, says: "Over the past 18 months, we have witnessed a significant increase in the number of new employees who have returned home, following a time working overseas. The majority had been based in the UK – primarily in London. However, some have come from further afield, including Australia, the US and Malaysia."

Guy Craigie, 32, is another returning emigrant, working at Knight Frank here.



IAN WHITE; CHRIS BELLEW/FENNEL PHOTOGRAPHY

The boys are back in town



After a decade in London, Robbie Dillon is working at Savills



Guy Craigie is now associate director with Knight Frank

He moved to London in July 2010 "at the height of the Irish economy crumbling". He had completed a bachelor's degree in geography and sociology at Trinity College Dublin in 2008 and had started a master's in property studies at Dublin Institute of Technology.

While on a summer internship in London, his parents called him and encouraged him to transfer his master's to a UK university, and to find a job there.

"I did it all within a week. I came home sold my car, moved to London, called Chestertons, the London estate agency, and started the week after in Wimbledon."

Craigie worked for seven years at Chestertons, coming in as a negotiator and leaving in 2017 as an associate director. He also completed a course in surveying at Reading University.

During his last four years at the firm, he worked at its Kensington office, where he was involved in the sale of a house for £22.5m and led the sale of an £8.5m apartment overlooking Hyde Park.

"It was an amazing four years working with the team in Kensington," says Craigie. "Then things began to slightly unfurl, with the Scottish independence referendum and Brexit. Various things came along that inhibited the market. Stamp duty increased dramatically and London didn't seem like a great investment choice any more."

"Most of our buyers were international, high-net-worth individuals, but it wasn't making sense, because the yields were so low and it was very expensive."

Craigie says his decision to come home

was a personal one. "I had spent seven years in London, and had to decide what I wanted to do for the rest of my life? Did I want to stay in the UK or come home and carve my own path?"

Knight Frank, the London brand that operates in Ireland, was the company he wanted to work with. Three months into his search, which he conducted from London, he got a call from the company in Ireland, completed his notice with Chestertons, and took up the position of associate director with his new employer.

"The benefit of Knight Frank is that we're a great international company. We're still a small residential team, but we have the backing of 70 people in the UK, and Rena O'Kelly and Peter Kenny [who head the residential team] are highly experienced," says Craigie.

He says his time in London armed him with a different skill set and a slightly different perspective of how things can be done in Ireland. He doesn't regret his time there, but he is glad he has returned.

"The quality of life here is so much better. My family is here and there is easy access to the sea, the mountains and the countryside."

It was that quality of life that drew Larry Oxley back to Dublin last April, after seven years living away. Oxley, who is originally from Co Laois, had completed his property degree at Athlone Institute of Technology in 2010, as the property market panned.

In London, he initially worked for Foxtons, a large UK brand, before travelling for a year and then returning to work



Larry Oxley now works at Hunters Estate Agent

“The quality of life in Ireland is so much better”

at Chestertons. He worked his way up the ranks from junior to senior negotiator and eventually to lettings manager.

"It's a busy and aggressive market over there," Oxley says. "There are multiple agencies where the winner takes all. However, property is a people business, and the Irish are hard working and tend to get on well with clients, so that mixture of hard work, likeability and strong customer focus helps us to progress."

Living in London was only ever a temporary move for Oxley, who married his wife, Aga, in 2016, but as he was leaving the UK he noticed a shift in the market. "Consumer confidence has dropped because of uncertainty surrounding Brexit. Transactions haven't stopped completely, but people are more cautious."

"After seven years of being away, we felt it was the right time to return and we could see the economy improve here. We also missed the outdoors. When you're living in London you're far removed from the mountains."

On returning home, Oxley struggled to find somewhere to rent, but eventually found a place in Stepaside – to be close to the mountains – and hopes to start the mortgage process shortly.

He is now working as senior sales negotiator with Hunters Estate Agent, which he says he joined because "it's a great company, with good insights into the Irish market, and it is still growing".

"It's nice coming back. Dublin is a vibrant city – there's a good buzz around and there's great energy," he says.

MARKET WATCH

LINDA DALY



The hoarding is up and digger operators are busy on a two-acre site in Tallaght. This is no private development: South Dublin county council has finally started work on 24 rapid-build homes opposite the popular Old Mill bar and restaurant, on the corner of the Killinenny and Firhouse Roads.

Or rather its contractor, Northern Ireland-based Forrme Construction, has. The builders arrived on site towards the end of last month, preparing it for the long-awaited €5.1m scheme.

The wheels of action often turn slowly in the public service, and the planning process for this rapid-build development began in November 2016.

The delay in construction, the council tells us, was due to hold-ups in the tendering process and agreement on site possession. That was finally settled in December. The undeveloped infill site has been vacant for years, used only as a shortcut by pupils from Firhouse community college.

So far there hasn't been anything rapid about this scheme – it's more of a marathon than a sprint – but things should move quickly now, as Forrme employs those all-important rapid-build elements in the construction process. The council says it expects to complete the houses, a mix of two- and three-bedroom homes, by October. The first occupants should be in by then, too.

The homes will go to those on its housing list, while homeless families on the priority list will be "considered for allocations". The site is in a good, accessible location in Tallaght, close to the M50 and on a couple of bus routes.

Private development is taking place a short walk from the Killinenny/Firhouse Road site, at Dodder Brook and Ballycullen Green, on Oldcourt Road. Prices there start from about €375,000.

The Killinenny/Firhouse site is one of three on which the council is building in the southwest Dublin area. Its first scheme of 80 homes got under way at St Aidan's halting site in Tallaght last August, and should be occupied by the summer.

It is also due to start building 59 houses in a €14.5m scheme at St Cuthbert's Park, in Clondalkin. Between the three developments, more than 160 homes will be added to the council's residential stock.

Pat Doyle, chief executive of the Peter McVerry Trust, the homeless charity, says he won't hold the delays in getting to this stage against the local authority. There was "a lot of learning at the early stages in 2016 around technologies and procurement."

"Rapid build will offer the quickest solution to getting people out of hotels and into their own homes."

For those on the housing list and especially those in homeless accommodation, the completion of the three schemes can't come quickly enough. This is exactly what is needed: more supply from local authorities/the government to counterbalance private development.

Finally, a balanced approach to a housing shortage that is in desperate need of solutions.

HOME FRONT ANTI-URBAN THINKING WILL HARM THE WHOLE COUNTRY

As the government starts discussing its new national plan, it should abandon the country versus city debate. Attempts to stop Dublin's growth would be damaging

LORCAN SIRR



The rural versus urban arguments have begun. The cabinet met on Monday to discuss the national planning framework, which will guide development and capital expenditure until 2040. It is the successor to the unlamented national spatial strategy.

Before Monday was out, the predictable debate between city and rural living had been triggered. The government is likely to capitulate on some of the key principles to keep certain voters and politicians happy, but, whatever it does, this plan will damage it politically, definitely locally and possibly nationally.

If it throws crumbs of infrastructure to random towns and villages in the country, as happened previously, then more harm than good will be done to the entire country.

The size of Dublin is cited as a problem, and

something to be curbed in case – God forbid – it grows even further. This is rural nativism. Dublin has its problems, but most of these are caused by poor planning and even poorer infrastructure. Many cities far larger than Dublin work far better, so the capital's problems can be solved.

Attempting to limit its growth to 25% of the predicted future population increase of 1m is a recipe for disaster and will have two immediate effects. First, land values will rocket, as new lands for housing are not zoned, leading to expensive housing. Second, expensive housing will lead to people living further away, resulting in even more commuting, travel poverty and an exacerbation of the problems that the plan thinks it is fixing.

It is a mistake to think that if the growth of Dublin is limited then people will move to other parts of the



Property prices will rise if Dublin's growth is curtailed

country. They will move, but to other countries.

Michael Ring, the minister for rural and community development, thinks "people need to be moved out of cities". People will live where they want and need to. Many of the things that cause the growth of cities are beyond our control, such as the locational needs of the high-value companies that we want to attract and the workers they bring. The country is two-thirds urbanised, and no Michael Ring will prevent that increasing.

This anti-city ethos has been around for more than a century. During his reign, Éamon de Valera said "we'll have no Manchesters, no Birminghams here", thus setting us back another half-century.

The growth of cities is a natural phenomenon when economies move from being agrarian to industrial and then become service-based. We skipped the

industrial phase and are now rapidly catching up with the concept of cities and how to manage them.

The idea that we will achieve balanced regional development is another politically populist but erroneous notion. Balanced regional development is achievable when there is a moderate difference in size between the largest city and the next largest, and so on. As we have refused to foster the growth of cities, Dublin city with its suburbs

is now about 10 times the size of the next largest city and suburbs, Cork. This makes the growth of Cork to "balance" Dublin a non-runner.

I would propose three things for the national planning framework. There must be a rethink, a new plan and more than one plan. Large swathes of rural Ireland have different long-term needs than many urban parts, hence one plan will be too general to be effective.

Implementation should be given to the Department of the Taoiseach. It needs a department with serious clout, as the previous plan was willfully ignored by councils and politicians alike.

Finally, the plan should be underpinned by acknowledging that what is good for cities, and Dublin in particular, is good for Ireland. That should be the starting point.

Let us be done with the anti-urban balance.

“Rural Ireland has different long-term needs than urban parts”