



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

Escape to the Country takes Jules to Dorset, where he meets a couple who have resurrected a familiar feature on our own Welsh Border hillsides, the shepherd's hut

Picture the scene... I'm not at home on the Welsh Borders, but on a Dorset hilltop overlooking Chesil Beach, the biggest shingle bank in Britain, and in the distance I can clearly see Portland Bill jutting out like a rugged elbow into the Channel.

As I gaze out upon one of the most recognisable tracts of England's coastline, I'm overlooked by a huge tower constructed to resemble a spy glass. Over 70 feet high, the Hardy Monument that has shared my view since it was built back in 1844 was erected not as you might think to Dorset's most famous son, Thomas Hardy, but rather to its second, sailor and vice admiral Sir Thomas Masterman Hardy. He was the flag captain of HMS Victory in whose arms Nelson famously died during the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. He and Nelson had been lifelong friends, and having survived the battle he went on to become a naval hero his own right and eventually First Sea Lord before his death in 1839.

Every year for one reason or another, I'm fortunate enough to find myself in this part of the country, one of my lifelong favourite counties. Dorset's coastline is as dramatic as its countryside, with an intoxicating mixture of rolling downs and incomparably pretty villages. For good reason it's always been a popular destination for those wishing to *Escape to the Country*, and this year we've seen a lot of it. More often than not, we're tasked with finding not just a home but something with holiday lets attached. Without a doubt, this is the hardest concoction to conjure as whatever the budget we're left having to stretch it two ways. In truth, you'll invariably spend more on the bricks and mortar of a let than it will ever reward you with, and it means that the business side of life is inextricably linked to your new home. If in the future you want to give one up, chances are you'll have to give up the other too. In short, all your eggs are in the same outbuilding.

Another way of trying to secure an income is of course glamping, and in recent years the craze has been towards yurts. The yurt itself is a fun idea, but despite what you might think it still needs a permanent base, lots of time and money to maintain, and are quite an expensive proposition for what is essentially a large tent made up of many layers.

If you've ever had to build one you'll know that putting them up and taking them down isn't a quick job when the weather's fine, let alone when there's rain or gale force winds.

That's why this month's trip to Dorset was even more enjoyable, because not only did our buyers want a home without a helipad, llamas or lets, I also got to take a closer look at something I've long felt to be the answer to the perennial holiday let issue – the shepherd's hut.

Set within walking distance of many sights that inspired the other Hardy to write *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in which of course Gabriel Oak himself had a hut, Richard Lee and Jane Dennison have led the charge in resurrecting the humble shepherd's hut and igniting our love of them. Inspired by a crumbling original, Richard set about building one for fun using bits and pieces he'd salvaged from others. Ten years and 300 huts later, Plankbridge Shepherd's Huts make some of the finest around. Clad with corrugated iron and based on copies of the original chassis, they come in all sorts of sizes and configurations for a fraction of the cost of renovating an outbuilding or building a new holiday let. What's more they're portable, re-sellable, and easily maintained. Well insulated and with wood burners included, they're usable all year round and without doubt look at home within any landscape.

I love making things and renovating, just as much as I love meeting people who've made a living out of doing the same. Richard was born in Dorset and grew up with Hardy. The idea of once again seeing shepherds' huts in the countryside was just that, an idea, but like all the best of them he's made it a reality. Hardy the writer would, I'm sure, have been proud, but then so too would Hardy the sailor, no doubt still keeping an eye on this beautiful county from the top of his spyglass monument.

• *Black Sheep is away*



JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archaeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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