

# Contents

**Cover story: Ultimate crash pad**  
How a passionate biker has created a house of ethereal beauty in the centre of Dublin **10**

**Houses of the week**  
A five-bedroom riverside home on two acres in Co Cork, and a four-bedroom space-age house in Dublin **18** **4**

**You snooze, you lose more**  
Irish investors who backed failed overseas property ventures are doing little to recoup their losses — unlike buyers from other countries **14**

**Shock of the hue**  
The neon colours of the Eighties are back to jazz up your home. Time to keep those sunglasses on indoors **18**

**Crunch question**  
Niall Toner gets his teeth into cereal composting — almost literally — to try to end rubbish-collection misery **23**

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Cover photograph: Barbara Corsico

## Time and place

# Louis Lovett

# Dinners in three acts

Louis Lovett, 37, an actor, recalls his home above the family restaurant in Cork, where his first performances meant waiting on the Australian rugby team and Mary Robinson

**M**y family moved into a big old Georgian house on Church Yard Lane, off the Well Road in Douglas — it's actually in Ballinlough, but the address is Douglas. My father had been a hotel manager and he and my mother bought the house to turn it into a restaurant, called Lovett's. It was a big house and my father felt the location was right. I remember leaving the old house in our Peugeot 504, which was piled with luggage. When we moved into the house, it was kind of untouched.

The house was in an L shape and was almost in two parts. The bottom half was the really grand part. There was a large pentagonal room with a beautiful bay window and a cute little porch onto the lawn. The former owners had used it as a living room and it became the restaurant. Above it was another room with a bay window and that was the private function room.

There was a sweeping staircase with lovely wooden banisters that led to a landing. To one side was the private function room and then on the other



The house in Ballinlough, Cork city

side was our living room and private quarters. Both those rooms had beautiful ornate fireplaces and huge Georgian windows. You could see Lough Mahon, Maryborough, Donnybrook, Douglas and east to Rochestown.

There were five children in the

family — I was the second youngest. The eldest was Niamh, then there was Dermot, Conor, who is also an actor, myself and Aoife.

I was five when we moved into the house and was terrified of leaving the sanctuary of upstairs. Whenever the restaurant was closed, it became a vast, dark place with monsters waiting to leap out at you.

Off the restaurant kitchen was the cold room, where we'd have butter by the box load and crates of milk. Whenever we ran out upstairs, I would dread being told to go down and get something from the kitchen. You would open the door upstairs and the red carpet swept down to an inky black.

One side of the house was bordered by the road and there was a fine old stone wall along it. It was 11ft or 12ft high and I used to have to shin my way over it whenever I was home late and the gates were locked.

There was also a lawn tennis court and an orchard. They hadn't been maintained and there was an air of times gone by about the place. We still have the original tennis net posts with the



Fergal Phillips

As a child, Lovett found the empty restaurant a scary place

winch on the side. There was also a massive roller, about 3ft in width, just cut out of stone. We used to have great fun trying to make it move.

The restaurant was known for being fancy — it was classic French cooking with the best of Irish ingredients. It was about doing simple things well.

The telephone was always ringing and somebody always had to be at home to answer it. It was the lifeline. Ironing was another thing we were always doing. You never watched television without ironing tablecloths and napkins.

I worked in the kitchens as a vegetable chef, washing and doing prep work. But I mainly worked as a waiter throughout my late teens. I'm a bit of a traditionalist and loved trying to serve as best I could. It was about making it an event for the customer, and you had an audience every night.

We had the then president, Mary Robinson, to dine there twice — once she was doing an opening nearby and asked us to open for lunch on a Saturday. She, her husband and her assistant sat there on their own.

We also had the Australian rugby team in, including Michael Lynagh and David Campese, and I served them.

There was a great atmosphere in the place and I think it was because it was a family-run restaurant. At any one time, my father would be there with two of his children. I think the staff enjoyed themselves as well; it sounds corny, but they were like an extended family.

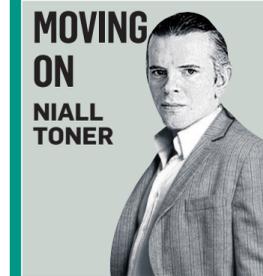
I moved out of the house when I was 21. I moved to Dublin to make it in a band — we didn't even get as far as having a name, however. It's a bit of a puzzler how Conor and I ended up in acting; we both just fell into it.

My parents gradually retired from the restaurant and Niamh took over. After some time, though, she felt it was too strenuous and decided to let it go. I was happy for her, because it was difficult to do on her own. It ended at the top of its game; it was still very successful.

I had my wedding there in 2006, a month before it closed. Tears were shed.

✦ Louis Lovett appears in the Corcadorca production of *MedEia* at Cork County Hall from June 16 to July 4

Interview by Kate Butler



**MOVING ON**  
NIALL TONER

**GOODBYE GOODBYE**  
It's a case of goodbye, goodbye for Richard Gibson, the star of the popular 1980s BBC sitcom *Allo Allo*. Gibson, below, who played Gestapo officer Herr Flick in the series, set in second world war France, has just found a buyer for his modest Stillorgan pile in Co Dublin. The actor has been living there since 1999 and he and his family are said to be trading up to a larger house in Donnybrook. The refurbished, four-bedroom semi came on the market just last February with an asking price in the region of €695,000.

**ANOTHER SHORTT CUT**  
Pat Shortt, the comedian, has reduced the price of his former home in Limerick again. The Killinaskully star has been trying to offload No 3 The Tontines in Castleconnell, about 17km outside Limerick city, since he moved into Worldsend House, the nearby Georgian pile he paid €2.7m for in October 2005 — €1.2m over the quoted advised minimum value (AMV). The five-bed Tontines was originally auctioned with an AMV of €950,000, but didn't attract a single bid. It was then put on the market private treaty at €850,000, reduced last summer to €750,000. Now you can have it for €550,000.

**DOLORES WON'T LINGER**  
Dolores O'Riordan, the former Cranberries lead singer, has said she wants to quit Ireland for good and move to Canada, where her 12-year-old son has secured a school place. Does this mean she is about to sell her five-bed, 5,800-sq-ft home on the edge of the Thormanby Woods development in Howth, Co Dublin? And if so, will it still be worth the €2m she paid for it back in autumn 2004?



✦ Got any gossip? E-mail [property.ireland@sunday-times.ie](mailto:property.ireland@sunday-times.ie)

## Is it worth it?

Co Dublin, €295,000



**What it is:** A derelict three-bedroom bungalow on 0.6 acres at Bohernabreena.

**The problems:** You can't argue with gravity. Nestled into a slope, the house was walloped at the rear by a landslide a few years ago and badly damaged. It has been uninhabited ever since. Renovation aside, a buyer will need to ensure the hill is secured, which may prove expensive. Demolishing and rebuilding the house might be best.

**The advantages:** If you elect to retain the shell, its footprint of 1,000 sq ft is a decent size for a rebuild. The property also has a separate, large shed and boiler house. The area is close to amenities but still feels like the countryside. The house is about 9km from Dublin city centre and is handy for access to the M50.

✦ JP & M Doyle, 01 490 3201

Dara Flynn



**"AS OTHER NATIONALITIES RALLY TO FIGHT ROGUE BUILDERS, THE IRISH PREFER TO SIT OUT THEIR DIFFICULTIES"**  
» PAGE 14

## Greenhouse effects: Thermo-King composter

**What is it?** A giant compost bin designed to rot waste without the addition of a chemical or rot accelerant.

**How does it work?** The Thermo-King rots the waste it contains using a combination of a good ventilation system and high thermal insulation. It is made of Thermolam material and has foam-insulated walls, so heat is generated faster and remains inside the composter. This accelerates the rotting process. It has a clamp lid that enables the discharge of humid air, producing what its makers say are ideal thermal conditions inside the composter. There are louvres near the base and on its sides, which also help the rotting process. It also has a wind-fix lid adjustment system, so air can circulate properly in both summer and winter. Fill it with kitchen and garden waste using one of two large flaps on the lid, and empty it though the flaps at the base.



**How green is it?** As green as any composter, but on a larger scale — it comes in sizes of 400, 600 and 900 litres. It's a good, eco-friendly measure for those with large households and gardens but no local authority "brown bin" waste collection. However, there are certain things you cannot dispose of, such as meat products, fish, cooked leftovers, bread, cheese rind and bones. It's UV- and weather-proof, and fully recyclable.

**How much does it cost and where can I get one?** €90 from Ecostore.ie. Mention the Home section when you order, and you will receive free delivery and a free CD Rom on home composting.

■ According to ASDA, the British supermarket chain, sales of slow cookers have been soaring as the recession encourages people to revert to cheap, low-fuss home cooking. The Morphy Richards slow cooker, for example, has seen a 1,613% sales uplift compared to last year. There is now a green version of this best-seller — the Morphy Richards Eco Electric Slow Cooker, which claims to use 66% less energy than a conventional oven and 44% less energy than other slow cookers. It costs €43.20 from ShopIreland.ie.

✦ Have you ever used a product featured here, or do you have any green tips? Tell us about it at [property.ireland@sunday-times.ie](mailto:property.ireland@sunday-times.ie)

## A tale of two Dublin 4 auctions

"Did the Easter bunny eat a great big hole in Dublin's normally effervescent auction market? Or has the giant bubble of Dublin's high-end home market finally burst?"

This was the question I asked in a column published in Home Ireland three years ago this month.

That column explored why two €10m-plus Dublin 4 homes had failed to achieve much more than their guideline prices after going to auction in June 2006. One squeaked over the line at auction, while the other was withdrawn and sold afterwards for a slightly higher figure.

This was remarkable because these two tepid auctions had put an end to the hottest run of sales ever witnessed in Ireland — and all in Dublin 4, at the very top of the market.

At the start of 2006, €58m had been paid for a home in Shrewsbury Road. In February that year, one home doubled its guideline, selling for €9.5m. Then came this double stall — at the time, agents attributed it to the summer lull.



**THE MARKET**  
MARK KEENAN

In retrospect, the brace of slow sales did prove to be the turning point in the fortunes of the Irish property market — the first hole in the bubble, the emperor's new clothes moment.

Come forward again to June 2009, and back in Dublin 4, we might just have had the first reasonably successful auction in three years.

Sherry FitzGerald brought a home on Raglan Road to market with an advised minimum value (AMV) of €1.9m. There was a packed auction room on June 4, with eight parties provided with conditions of sale. The property sold under the hammer for €2.55m.

Granted, properties on this road have sold for €9m in the boom years. And the agents confirmed that the house would have sold at €2m had that been the bottom bid.

The same agents have since sold a five-bedroom detached period home in Rathmines for €1.55m, following another heated auction. The AMV was €1.2m.

Although two swallows don't make a summer, or the basis of a recovery in any market, could it be possible that the first signs of the bottom being reached are emerging in the same leafy lanes where the bubble burst in the first place?

Certainly the first signs of what appear to be leafy shoots are showing elsewhere at the top of the market.

Next door in Britain, the latest figures show that house prices actually rose by 2.6% in May. In London, agents report that foreign nationals are busy buying premium properties.

In America, where the subprime mess started, Florida properties — which were the first to take a hit — are selling again.

In Paris, prices have stopped falling and sales are once again being completed.

And in the leafy lanes of Dublin 4? The Raglan Road sale is significant, especially followed by the Rathmines sale, because whereas the bottom of the Irish market has been ticking along somewhat lethargically since the crash started, the top has remained totally frozen.

These sales, albeit at fractions of the prices achieved in the boom years, are important because they give some indications of where the bottom lies for this paralysed market segment. Something that wasn't apparent at all until now.