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REAL ESTATE | HOMES

Home Buyers Beware of Tall Tales and Family Legends

European homes—some that date from the medieval era—have seen their share of history. But potential buyers should be savvy about claims to fame.

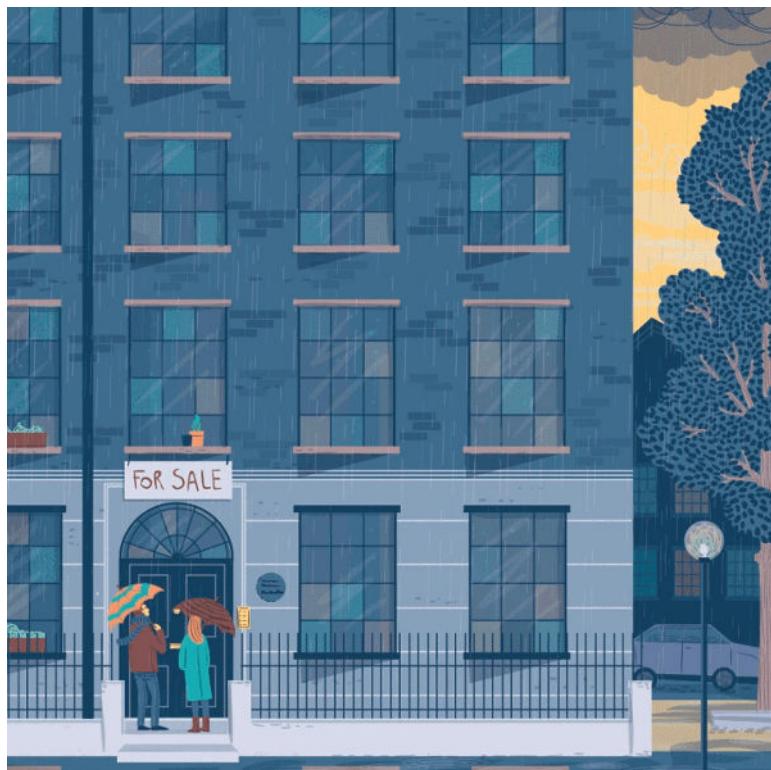


ILLUSTRATION: FEDERICA BORDONI

By CHARLIE WELLS and ART PATNAUDE

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When 25 Craven St. in London hit the market for \$7 million a few years ago, prospective buyers heard a whale of a tale: Herman Melville, author of “Moby-Dick,” once lived there. A blue historical marker mounted out front

commemorates the literary tie.

Technically, it's true. The amount of time Mr. Melville lived there: "a few weeks," says Howard Spencer, a senior historian with English Heritage, the conservation organization that runs London's Blue Plaques historical-marker program.

Leaf through listings of luxury properties across Europe and you'll soon notice that history is everywhere. In the U.K., ads for high-end homes occasionally mention connections to monarchs. In France, a visit by Napoleon or a member of his retinue is a common selling point. In Italy, it might be an artist or writer who spent time at a villa now on the market for millions.

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"Clients love the romance of historical stories," says Kathryn Brown, director of operations at Paris Property Group, a Parisian real-estate agency. "But you want to make sure that they're not just selling you a pretty story."

Ms. Brown says she was once told that members of the Murat family—Joachim Murat was Napoleon's brother-in-law—lived in the Paris apartment she was renting. She could never verify the assertion, and the space's faux historic moldings and coats of arms left her skeptical.

Part of the problem is that some homeowners may have started to believe their own family's myths, says Oliver Cox, who leads a team of Oxford University researchers who specialize in property histories. "Often, if they've changed hands frequently, myths and legends are passed on to the next generation," says Mr. Cox. Even stories that may not have been true to begin with can gain currency by being retold over the years, he adds.

To verify a home's past life, Mr. Cox suggests checking Google Books for old accounts by local historians at the time. Local societies and government records can also help.

In Italy, centuries of ownership are recorded in municipal, regional and national archives. Structural changes—down to the location of a single window hundreds of years ago—can be looked up. Letters and photographs can provide evidence of famous visitors. However, the time commitment can be daunting, so house

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hunters may be better off seeking professional help, advises Ian Heath, a broker at Florence-based Lionard Luxury Real Estate. "It's difficult to know where to look," he says. "An ordinary member of the public wouldn't have a chance."

Architect Andrea Pierattelli has dug through archives to assemble dossiers on properties listed by Lionard. A report on a single home can be hundreds of pages long, he says, with details about physical changes to buildings as well as cultural history.

When Mr. Pierattelli was researching the history of Villa Solaia, a grand home in Siena owned by the Vivantes, a family known for its patronage of the arts, it took little effort to confirm the names of artists who had spent time there. Books in the archives confirmed that Marino Marini, a famous 20th-century Italian sculptor, and others had stayed at the home, which was sold last summer. The sale price was not disclosed; the property had been listed at €7 million, or about \$7.4 million.

Geraint Franklin, an investigator for Historic England, an organization that oversees the listing of historic buildings, recommends ways to research claims.

First, check out well-established programs, such as London's Blue Plaques, that document buildings' famous residents. Then, look for published diaries or clubs and organizations devoted to the person in question. Recently, the Jane Austen Society of the United Kingdom refuted claims by Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond that the author had connections to Wentworth Woodhouse, the 250,000-square-foot Yorkshire mansion said to be the inspiration for Pemberley, the fictional home of Mr. Darcy in "Pride and Prejudice."

Finally, research the house itself. Some homes have their own archives, kept privately or in public libraries. Mr. Franklin also recommends seeking out wills, estate maps and tax records, which are often held in the local record office.

Ms. Brown, the agent in Paris, suggests an even more basic method. "One of the first things we do when we're looking at a listing for a client is to check Wikipedia," she says, noting that it is common for addresses in Paris and other large European cities to have their own entries. While these listings shouldn't be

used as a definitive source, she says, they can provide a starting point for gathering information about a property.

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