

On a quiet Thursday lunchtime, the county town of Lincoln is peaceful, but far from lifeless. Tourists stroll through the pretty medieval streets around the ancient cathedral, stopping every so often to pick up a tempting morsel from Carousel Chocolates, or to enjoy the views from the top of Steep Hill (voted Britain's best street in 2011 by the Academy of Urbanism). Outside the cathedral, the stone houses that face the medieval building seem to be dozing in the watery sunshine.

It's fair to say that Lincoln, like the county over which it presides, is one of England's forgotten spots. Famous residents notwithstanding (Margaret Thatcher hailed from Grantham), few people know about this long stretch of land, with its unspoilt countryside and pretty villages. Of course it has its grottier parts — the seaside resorts of Skegness and Mablethorpe are hardly upmarket — but Lincolnshire is definitely worth a second look. New figures from Savills estate agency show that it is now one of the best-value counties in Britain, with average prices still 19% below their peak. "Somebody once described it to me as the poor man's Gloucestershire," says Briony Mathams, a search agent with Stacks, who covers the area. "You can find the same kind of beautiful stone houses, but you don't have to pay nearly as much."

Not only can you pick up a Georgian rectory for £500,000 — it would cost more than three times that in Surrey —

the fast train from Grantham takes a little more than an hour to reach Leeds or London, and it has excellent state grammar schools.

Lisa and James Kennard succumbed to the county's charms a year ago, when they sold their four-bedroom terraced home in Earlsfield, southwest London, for just under £600,000 and bought a five-bedroom home with a large garden in the village of Barrowby, near Grantham, for a little more than £450,000.

"It's one of the best decisions we've ever made," says Lisa, 36, a stay-at-home mother who grew up in Lincolnshire and whose own mother lives near Stamford. "We can walk to the primary school where we'll send our children, it's great value for money for housing, and when James has to go to central London for work [he is a partner in a company that conducts feasibility studies for visitor attractions], it takes him only a bit longer to get there from Grantham as it did from Earlsfield."

The couple, who have two children, Harry, 3, and Phoebe, 1, hope to move to a more rural part of the county in time, but plan to stay in Lincolnshire for life. "We haven't looked back," Lisa says.

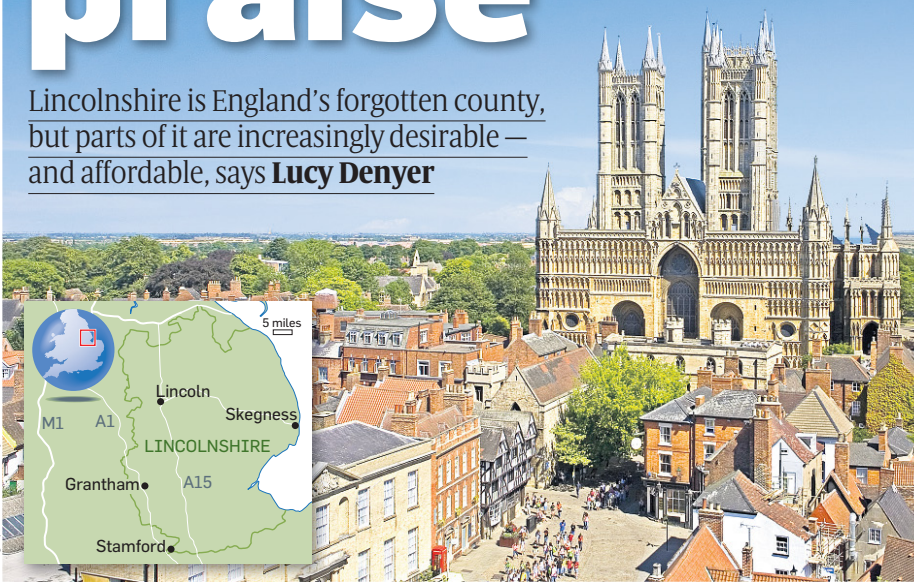
Sound tempting? If so, where should you look, and what can you get for your money? Roughly speaking, the county can be divided into three main areas: to the north, Lincoln is the hub, and people who live here are more likely to work in the area (Siemens is a large local employer). The eastern part, towards the coast, is flatter and mostly agricultural, while the southern part of the county,

Worthy of praise

Lincolnshire is England's forgotten county, but parts of it are increasingly desirable — and affordable, says **Lucy Denyer**



Photographer's Choice (left: Michael Powell)



THE SUNDAY TIMES
thesundaytimes.co.uk/home

05.05.13 | 11



from Grantham down to Stamford, is more London-oriented, with countryside that is a little more rolling.

The heart of the county, spiritually if not geographically, is Lincoln, with excellent shopping and restaurants, a lively student population and lots going on, from concerts and plays to a Christmas market. Top of the pile, property-wise, are the streets near the cathedral, known as Uphill Lincoln, near a sought-after independent school, Lincoln Minster. Houses are old and dignified, and buyers tend to have to join a waiting list.

Savills is selling a rare gem in the area, Grade II-listed Disney Place, for £1.25m. The nine-bedroom Georgian pile has been in the same family for 34 years, and needs updating, but it comes with part of a Roman wall (01522 508908, savills.co.uk). For a more affordable entry into the city, Haart is marketing a pretty four-bedroom semi-detached property in the St Catherine's area, with a bespoke kitchen, sash windows, two receptions and a south-facing rear garden, for £230,000 (01522 510088, haart.co.uk).

If you prefer to be away from the hustle and bustle, look to one of the villages that surround Lincoln. A three-bedroom stone cottage in Wellingore,



Toft House is a six-bedroom Georgian home in Marston, near Grantham. £750,000; 01522 508908, savills.co.uk

10 miles south of the city, is available for £250,000 with Savills (as above). The neighbouring village of Navenby is also a draw, as it has shops, restaurants, a primary school, a doctor's surgery and a butcher selling some of the best Lincolnshire sausages around.

Like the thought of a beautiful village home, but don't fancy the upkeep? Hainton House, in Branston, two miles from Lincoln, is a Grade II-listed Georgian rectory that has been turned into seven flats by Castle Square Developments, under the hand of George Lockwood. "There haven't been many projects like this in our part of the world," says Lockwood, whose next project is to transform a Victorian villa near the cathedral. "We've had terrific interest." Two of the flats have sold; prices start at £160,000 (01522 536777, pygott-crone.com).

Head south down the A15 and the landscape gradually changes from flat to undulating. This is commuter country, with fast trains to the capital from

Grantham (70min) and Peterborough (50 min) in neighbouring Cambridgeshire. The market in these parts has been fairly active of late, says Amanda Hoskins, branch manager of William H Brown estate agency in Grantham, who has seen a "mini boom" since January.

While Grantham is perhaps not the most exciting of towns, it is perfectly pleasant, with solid Victorian red-brick terraces, two good grammars and an outstanding state academy, Belvoir High, nearby. You can pick up a two-bedroom terraced house within walking distance of the station for about £70,000: such properties make decent rental investments, with a return of 6%-7%, according to Hoskins. A modern detached family home with four bedrooms will set you back about £200,000.

More desirable are villages such as Long Bennington, Bottesford, Marston and Skillington, where Newton Fallowell is selling a five-bedroom contemporary barn conversion for £385,000 (01476



The Thatched Cottage, in Thimbleby, has three bedrooms. £225,000; 01507 522222, robert-bell.org

591900, newtonfallowell.co.uk). Foodie buyers would do well to look towards the village of Great Gonerby, home to Lincolnshire's only Michelin-starred restaurant, Harry's Place.

A little farther south, towards gorgeous, predominantly Georgian Stamford — recently rated the best place to live in Britain by The Sunday Times — a golden triangle of villages stretches from Stamford across to Greatford and up towards Witham on the Hill. You would be looking at about £500,000 for a four-bedroom property with a decent-sized garden or more than £1m for something with outbuildings and more land. Fletland Manor and Mill, just north of Greatford, is on the market for £1.95m (01780 484520, kingwest.co.uk).

Agents expect more people to cotton on to the wealth of good-value property in this unsung county — just like the Kennards. "We've got so much more space now than we had in London," Lisa says. "The quality of life is brilliant."



The Kennards swapped London for five bedrooms near Grantham for less than £500,000; left, Lincoln