

Movers and

Wanted: a special kind of estate agent. Skills must include supplying wigs for undercover viewings, knowledge of paparazzi vantage points and endless patience. **Simon Brooke** meets the men who put celebrities in touch with their houses

STAR BUYER

Simon Barnes has managed to find homes for some of the most famous – and you would imagine demanding – people in the world, but his dealings with Naomi Campbell were less than successful.

'We'd identified a mews house that seemed just what she wanted, so I arranged to show it to her,' he remembers. 'I arrived and waited. Then I waited some more. Finally, three hours later, I saw her car pull up, so I went out to say hello.'

But before he could say anything, Campbell's Chelsea tractor suddenly sped off. 'It turned out a black cab had arrived in the mews behind her and she was convinced she was being followed by paparazzi,' says Barnes. 'It was just a black cab for goodness' sake. London's full of them. It was so pathetic I had to laugh.'

Barnes's charm is as legendary as his knowledge of the property market, and he usually finds even his most wealthy and famous clients are very personable. It's their entourages who are the drama queens.

'I've found that it's the assistant's assistant who gives you hell; their bosses are often very down-to-earth,' he says, giving the example of one Hollywood A-lister who, while renting in London, eschewed his team of minders to tackle a common problem familiar to any tenant.

'Johnny Depp rang me on his mobile and said: "Hello, it's Johnny Depp here. Do I pay my rent on time?" I said, "Yes, of course." Then he said, "Am I a good tenant?" I said, "Yes, you're great." Then he said: "So why doesn't my f**ing home phone work then?" Actually, he said it in a nice way.'

Barnes, 40, who's worked in property for more than 20 years and currently lives in Mayfair, has found homes for Tom Hanks and Demi Moore among others. He charges 1.5 per cent and works on his own. He's coy about his earnings, but a fellow estate agent revealed, 'Top agents do very nicely – better than any estate

agent could ever hope to. They probably find three or four million pounds' worth of property a month.' Which means average earnings of £45,000 a month.

Location and value for money are just as important to celebrity buyers as they are to the rest of us.

'They know that people who are selling or letting are going to behave differently if there's a big name involved,' explains Barnes. 'So we visit properties to find what's right for them and only then do we arrange for them to view.' Barnes, whose clients include wealthy Russians, Americans and Hong Kongers, is as discreet as any top-end property consultant: privacy and confidentiality are his

bywords. But sometimes celebrities let the cat out of the bag themselves. 'Vanessa Paradis asked the local supermarket to deliver, but once she gave her name and address, the paparazzi descended,' he says.

When Madonna was looking for a house a few years ago, she asked Simon Barnes to find her something. 'One morning I visited a house that was ideal, and she arranged a visit that afternoon,' he says. 'I explained to the owner who my client was and she promised not to say anything to anyone. But when we returned, the owner, 20 friends and even her mother just happened to be sitting in the living room.' Madge, apparently, saw the funny side of it.



Simon Barnes in one of his properties in Brompton Cross (this picture); celebrity tenants Vanessa Paradis and Johnny Depp (below left); and an apartment Barnes is handling in Hyde Park Gardens (bottom left)



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