

Bridging the gap

Scrapping the Severn Bridge tolls has put Wales in the spotlight, as buyers consider hopping over the border to get more for their money. **Madeleine Silver** explores

WHEN the first Severn Bridge was opened by The Queen in 1966, it was hailed as the dawn of a new economic era for south Wales, slashing what had been a 12-hour journey to London's West End.

Although removing bridge tolls in December 2018—saving commuters up to £1,400 a year—might not have felt quite as momentous, agents say the change has fuelled a spike in interest in Welsh property.

'It's noticeable—there's definitely more activity,' says managing director at Stacks Property Search James Greenwood (01594 842880). 'There's also a lot more traffic on the roads and a lot of people talking about it. The question is: is that because the tolls came down or because the pressure on price on the English side of the Severn is so great that people have been squeezed west?'

Dan Rees at Savills Cardiff (029-2036 8915) responds: 'For people who don't know Wales and didn't perhaps grow up there, I'm sure the scrapping of the tolls has widened their search. If they're commuting, they haven't got to worry about that extra cost.'

There are slightly different attitudes and values to money on the other side of the river

Most new activity, say agents, has been focused towards the middle to lower end of the market. 'We're talking about the sub-£300,000 level, especially new-builds,' says Anthony Clay of Fine & Country Monmouth (01600 713030). 'What will cost you £350,000 in Bristol will cost you £250,000 here, and

it's also beneath the raised tax levels of Wales. People who work in Bristol in the middle end of the market will commute, bridge tolls or no bridge tolls.'

'If they're not Welsh, I think people are surprised by how beautiful south Wales is,' muses Leah Mullin of Knight Frank Cardiff (029-2044 0138). 'If I wanted to go and walk in the Brecon Beacons one weekend, it only takes 40 minutes to get there; if I want to go for a swim in the sea, it's 30 minutes away. The mix of amenities is a massive pull.'

For buyers willing to widen their search, tempted by the new ease of the bridge, budgets will still stretch further across the border. 'There will always be a bit more value for money in Wales compared with England,' says Mr Rees, with Savills research showing Welsh properties are nearly £100 cheaper per square foot than on the English side of the bridge. 'Initially,



Property comment



The Usk valley in the Brecon Beacons is proving attractive to potential buyers

there was a bit of a surge and a scramble for properties and I think the values did go up a little bit. But, as time has gone on, things have flattened out.'

Monmouthshire, often considered 'Wales light'—'not too Welsh,' explains Mr Clay—boasts the popular market towns of Usk and Monmouth; the latter is home to the Haberdashers' Monmouth Schools, a major draw. Crickhowell, the other side of Abergavenny, is also in high demand, with its high street enlivened by independent shops. Agents advise sticking near to the bridge for a daily Bristol commute; the realistic commuter belt is between Chepstow and Newport near the motorway, including popular Caldicot. 'You also have the Severn Tunnel Junction or Newport train stations on your doorstep here, and can be in London in two hours on a fast train,' adds Mr Rees.

Why not take the plunge? 'It's a bit of a cliché, but people can be surprised by how warmly they're made to feel at home in Wales,' says Mr Greenwood. 'There are slightly different attitudes and values to money on the other side of the river. It is a more relaxed place.' ↵

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Take me to the river... and beyond

Properties worth leaving England for

Usk, Monmouthshire (above)

Set amid Monmouthshire's Lower Usk Valley, 19th-century Glyn Heulog is approached up a gravel drive and overlooks mature gardens. There are seven bedrooms, three bathrooms and a kitchen with an AGA. Outside is a former stable block with two original stalls and two garages, as well as a pair of adjoining cottages. £995,000 through Fine & Country (01600 775930)

Chepstow, Monmouthshire (below)

The Dene is in a small hamlet on the fringes of Chepstow, situated next to a shallow brook with established gardens and split-level sun terraces. There are three first-floor bedrooms and a family bathroom, as well as an attached two-storey annexe. £850,000 through Savills (0117-295 7573)



Crickhowell, Powys

Only yards from the town centre of popular Crickhowell, crowned the UK's best high street in 2018, is 18th-century Dan Y Castell. There are six bedrooms, a conservatory, cellar and domestic offices, with views from the garden over the glorious Brecon Beacons. £1.35 million through Bidmead Cook (01873 853640)

Llantilio Crossenny, Monmouthshire

Cae Hedd is a barn conversion and annexe that together provide six bedrooms, with a detached office and double garage. Set in just over 2½ acres, the property enjoys views over the countryside between Monmouth and Abergavenny. As well as an orchard and greenhouse, there is a 10ft-deep natural swimming pool. £850,000 through Roscoe Rogers & Knight (01600 772929)

St Arvens, Chepstow, Monmouthshire (right)

In the popular village of St Arvens, The Laurels, a period home with five bedrooms, a timber orangery and wine cellar, is set behind a walled entrance. The impressive kitchen runs the full depth of the property and the drawing room looks onto the garden from the original sash windows. £915,000 through Savills (0117-933 5802)



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