

ANDREA WATSON on the rise of the unofficial caretaker

THE view from the eighth floor of the building is quite simply staggering. To the left is the ghostly outline of Battersea Power Station, soon to be surrounded by luxury flats. To the right are the delicate outlines of the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben and if you lean out of the window far enough, you can just about see the London Eye, Gherkin and Shard.

Myriad other important buildings can be pointed out, for this is one of the most complete Thames panoramas you can get as the river here is quite straight.

It is also astonishingly quiet considering this is the heart of central London, for the river is the road and there's not much traffic on it except kayaks and a couple of party boats. If this was a luxury apartment, it would be almost priceless but it is not, it's a former office block and, as it happens, currently the home of my son Nicholas.

He is one of the new breed of property "guardians" and his enormous apartment in this old building costs him just £100 a week all-inclusive: no rates, no utility bills, no management fees and, to cap it all, a parking place.

The building belongs to the Crown Estate but it cannot be identified because its owners do not wish, and have no need, to advertise. The company Live-in Guardians, which 'licenses' my son to live here, has a list as long as both your arms of applicants hoping to get on the property ladder in this unconventional, and temporary, manner.

Before the guardians came, Nick's penthouse apartment was a target for squatters. Now banned in residential property, it is still not a criminal offence to squat in an office or pub and increasingly these are the premises being targeted, according to law firm Winckworth Sherwood. It's also seen as fair game by some.

The idea of putting people into properties to deter squatters started in the 1990s in Holland when there was a major problem with illegal occupation of empty residential buildings, which led to riots and ferocious evictions. I witnessed one of these evictions and was nearly trampled to death on a bridge in Amsterdam when a mob pursued by baton-wielding riot police appeared out of nowhere. Something had to be done and it was 1993 when Camelot, a Dutch property management firm, dreamed up a new security model: put people into buildings and let them act as guards.

Guardians were required to abide by strict rules and had no tenancy rights. Camelot soon expanded and within a few years had lobbied the French government and was providing services in several European countries, including England.

This type of property management service has now become very popular in the UK, with

**ALL
CHANGE:
Battersea
Power
Station**



LUCKY LIVING:
Nick Watson and
the amazing
view from his
apartment.
'We get it for next
to nothing'

Guardian angels

more than 20 companies offering it, including Live-in Guardians run by Arthur Duke, who has dozens of properties ranging from small houses with three people in them to an 8,000 sq feet mansion in Westminster.

Here, as in Holland and elsewhere, guardians do not have the same rights as tenants and they may be given as little as three weeks' notice.

They also have to abide by many rules that an ordinary tenant would not have to – they may not have friends to stay, parties, smoking is prohibited and they may have to allow access to their rooms to a keyholder, usually a security guard. Children and pets are not permitted. Guardianship is not possible for families.

Mr Duke, who has been astonished by the growth of his business and how firms offering guardian services have mushroomed, said: "We have a long waiting list for people looking for property but we only license full-time professionals aged 21 or over and mature students. They pay between £70 and £100 a

week and we call it a licence fee. The idea is the guardians have no tenancy rights. The fee is all-inclusive and a lot lower than a commercial rent, plus they are not going to get a sudden massive electricity bill, so they can budget and save money.

"A lot of people use the system to save for a deposit to buy a place. It is a win-win situation."

The reasons for the sharp rise in the number of firms offering guardian services are obvious: buying and renting property are becoming prohibitively expensive, particularly in London. Meanwhile there are thousands of empty properties and while squatting in residential homes is illegal, there are plenty of empty commercial properties that

need protection.

The Government, aware of the increase in squatter activity in commercial property, is even considering legislation, according to Emma Chadwick of Winckworth Sherwood.

The downsides of being a guardian would deter some people from considering this as a

housing solution. The first, of course, is lack of a secure tenure but Nick accepts this and other restrictions.

He said: "You are only allowed two people in at one time, so no parties, but since I am paying so little I can afford to go out and party in London. But the big thing is the space. Our rooms are so large we don't even bother to use the communal rooms that we have here because everyone has their own living room in the bedroom. When visiting friends I really notice how small a lot of people's rooms are, having lived here."

In the case of the building that Nick helps look after, there is lighting and hot water but no central heating – you can use oil-filled stoves to keep your room warm but the corridors are freezing in winter. There are no baths – only shower cubicles in municipal-style washrooms.

The communal lounge is indeed so large that no one uses it. All decoration is undertaken at your own expense and the four people on Nick's floor have made a good job of it, scouring charity and junk shops for furniture and other items. They even have weekly cleaner to look after their rooms.

Mr Duke said: "Some of the people have done amazing things in that building. We hope to get it photographed."

Next door, in a tower block built recently, the owners have paid millions for the location. "I'm always polite to them but they probably hate us," said Nick, "because they have paid £1million for the view and we get it for next to nothing."

INFORMATION: liveinguardians.com



NEW BREED:
Nick in his
enormous
apartment

Power landmark is opening up

IT HAS hosted many events and exhibitions, including one on Chinese art, but London's Battersea Power Station is opening its doors to the public for only the second – and last – time before it is redeveloped. Thousands are expected

to turn out for the Open House London event on September 21/22 when they will be able to view the inside of the Grade II* listed temple of power designed by Gilbert Scott and closed in 1983.

Visitors will be given guided tours starting at the pop-up park on the

riverbank through central boiler houses and vast Turbine Hall to the east of the building.

Battersea Power Station Development Company will then begin work on redeveloping the building to form the centrepiece of a new complex of luxury apartment towers. ● londonopenhouse.org