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Jonathan Margolis finds out what his neighbours' homes are really worth

The web has in the past few months brought the very British art of curtain twitching thoroughly into the 21st century. And we're not talking amateur curtain twitching either. No, the power of the internet has now opened up to neighbourly scrutiny the most personal information we possess—what we paid for our houses.

Did that house down the road really fetch the ridiculous asking price? Were that flash pair who were bragging about the killing they made when they sold their flat lying through their teeth? And—the all-important question—how much would your place realistically achieve if you called in Hamptons tomorrow?

A variety of new websites have opened for business during 2005, following the Land Registry's decision to licence reuse of all its post-2000 house price data. With just a few sneaky clicks, anyone can now snoop into how much their neighbours, friends and family paid for their homes and whether they even own them. Not surprisingly this glut of information has been red meat to my more intrusive brothers and sisters in the smaller and less pink media because celebrities don't have an opt-out to avoid their fiscal intimacies being made available to gawpers (though such gawpers do of course, need to know who lives where—not something the site tells us).

There is, of course, a serious purpose beyond the mere nosiness of making the house price data publicly available with such ease: it sends a depth charge into the bowels of the estate agency business. Don't get me wrong, I haven't got a problem with estate agents (it's not easy for a journalist, after all, to denigrate another profession as parasitic). But I do think it's in the interests of everything that's good and fair for the rest of us to be able to check if they're telling the truth. Equally, having such information available gives us much of the raw data we need to exercise our democratic right to sell without the benefit of an agent.

Top honours for user-friendliness among property price websites go to Hampshire-based www.ourproperty.co.uk which is not only an exemplar of superb web design, aesthetics, literacy and functionality—I mean, basically, perfection in every sense—but it completely free (I'm itching to know how it makes a profit). The site limits each client to 20 searches per week, with no facility for paying for more searches. This, I assume, is to deter estate agents from hogging its server, although it could be annoying if you were genuinely house hunting. (By the way, I believe the secret of OurProperty's mysterious business model is that the site is a gently come-on for an internet consultancy called www.fubra.com: "Our mission? To make businesses work on the web." It says, and judging by OurProperty, I'm convinced.)

The other brand leader in this area, www.myhouseprice.com is less remarkable, but nevertheless fine. The site charges £1 per property, for which this serious house-hunting resource provides pertinent information, such as market reports on a specified area. Of course, if your interest is in who owns a specific property, you need to go a little further.

The Land Registry's own site, www.lanreg.gov.uk, isn't bad for a public service effort. The Land registry charges £2 for a pdf file of an extract of the property's title, plus a further £2 for a title plan, all important for those engrossing boundary disputes.

Incidentally, if you're a real property gossip addict, there's a site which will become the centre of your life: www.theratandmouse.co.uk. It's the kind of weblog thing to which I wouldn't normally give mouse room but its wealth of intelligence and curtain-twitch information about London property stuff makes it a snooper's must see.