

LIVING IN

Scarsdale, N.Y.: A Pricey Suburb With an Old World Air

Residents of the Westchester town, who pay a lot to live there, dispute its reputation as “a bit snooty.” And prices have been coming down (slightly).



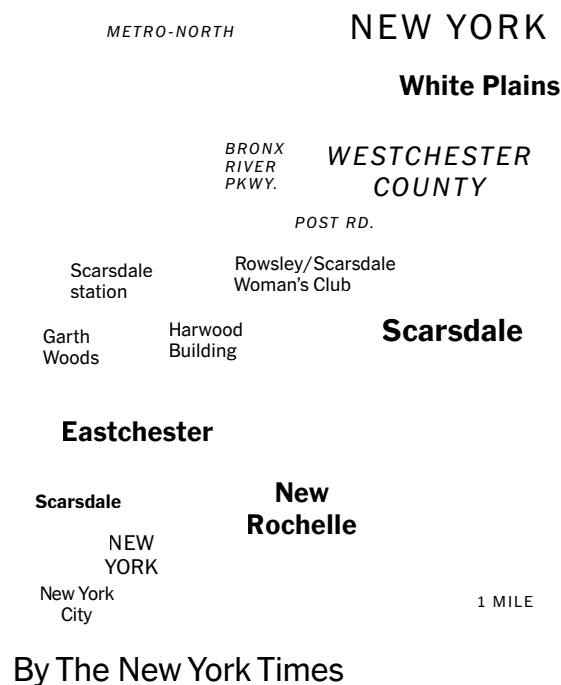
By **C. J. Hughes**

Dec. 4, 2019

In a state called New York, British place names can seem a dime a dozen. But Scarsdale, on first impression, takes its Englishness to another level.

Presiding over the compact downtown that greets those arriving by train is the towering Harwood Building, with a turret and gables that recall an Elizabethan castle — an unlikely sight in suburban central Westchester.

The 6.7-square-mile town, which was settled in 1701 by English aristocrat Caleb Heathcote, has no shortage of road names that evoke his homeland, including Whig, Tory and Paddington. And large, opulent houses, set back behind deep lawns at the end of runway-long driveways, as in the ritzy Murray Hill section, are facsimiles of the manor houses that speckle the English countryside.



Such Old World airs, coupled with the distinction of being one of the country's wealthiest towns — the average household rakes in \$417,335 a year, according to Bloomberg — can make Scarsdale intimidating to some buyers.

“It had a reputation as a little bit snooty,” said David Benderson, 41, an ophthalmologist, who grew up in Pennsylvania but spent time with relatives in nearby Dobbs Ferry and Ossining as a child.

In 2014, Dr. Benderson and his wife, Mythili Murthy, an endocrinologist who is now 41, and their two young sons were unhappily living in Annapolis, Md., where they were frustrated by the sleepy pace in the winter and a lack of play dates for their children.

Deciding to “roll the dice and try something different,” Dr. Benderson and his family began hunting in Westchester, though they steered clear of Scarsdale in favor of Irvington and other river towns. They wanted to rent for a while, to get a feel for the area, but had a hard time finding a house to rent. A hot sales market at the time meant a dearth of rental inventory.

Reluctantly, Dr. Benderson went to see a three-bedroom house in the Edgewood section of Scarsdale and was pleasantly surprised. With well-kept, modestly sized homes, and socially conducive tenth-of-an-acre lots, he said, Edgewood “was not at all what we expected Scarsdale to look like.”

The test run worked out. A year later, they bought a Tudor-style house, built in 1928, with four bedrooms, three and a half bathrooms, and stone details on its facade. In 2015, the house, which needed work — the kitchen and baths were eventually redone — cost about \$1.05 million.



Scarsdale's downtown is lined with Tudor-style buildings that give it an English look. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The couple's early assumptions have faded. "There are so many really down-to-earth and interesting people here," Dr. Benderson said.

Scarsdale, which is 76 percent non-Hispanic white and 15 percent Asian according to census figures, has a growing population from overseas, said Harry Bellew, 47, who grew up

in England and has lived in Spain, Colombia and the Netherlands.

In 2014, Mr. Bellew, who works for a cloud computing company, and his wife, Kara Bellew, a lawyer who is now 43, were living in a two-bedroom condo in Hoboken, N.J., but needed to move closer to White Plains, N.Y., where Ms. Bellew was offered a new job.

“Insular” Scarsdale made them skittish, said Mr. Bellew, who is Hispanic. But being 21 miles from Midtown Manhattan and having strong schools made the town tough to ignore. The Bellews rented a Tudor-style house there, before plunking down \$1.28 million in 2017 for a colonial-style four-bedroom, built in 1925, that they share with their two daughters.

If his twice-weekly pickup soccer games are any indication, Scarsdale is quickly becoming cosmopolitan, Mr. Bellew said: “It’s much more diverse here than I thought.”

What You’ll Find

Shaped like a wrinkled bow tie, Scarsdale, population 18,000, is squeezed between White Plains and Eastchester, but with a much more homogeneous look than those places. That’s not by

accident. Beginning more than a century ago, the town has kept a white-knuckle grip on its growth.



74 MAMARONECK ROAD | A four-bedroom, five-and-a-half-bathroom colonial-style house, built in 1925, with a pool and a guesthouse, listed for \$2.195 million. 914-629-1940
Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

In 1915, it voted to become a village to prevent White Plains from annexing it — the state can change a town’s borders, but not a village’s — and in 1922, Scarsdale imposed townwide zoning, the rare suburb to do so. (Today, the town and village are conterminous.)

But efforts to create a virtual moat around the suburb weren’t always successful. In 1930, a justice ruled that Scarsdale had improperly rejected a developer’s plan for a rental complex by the Bronx River Parkway, noting that apartments made up less than half a percent of Scarsdale’s housing stock, versus 9 percent in Pelham Manor, to the south.

That development, the red-brick Scarsdale Chateaux, an eight-building, 116-unit non-elevator complex that is now a co-op, squeaked through. But multifamily housing is still a rarity in Scarsdale, be it rentals, co-ops or condos. Christie Place, with 42 age-restricted condos, arrived in 2008. And there is the Heathcote, a 14-unit project in the Five Corners area. After struggling to sell its one- to three-bedroom units as a co-op, the complex is reincorporating as a condo for a second try, said Dawn Knief, a Compass agent there. The apartments, which start at \$6,500 a month, are rented in the meantime, Ms. Knief said.

Mostly, Scarsdale offers handsome single-family homes, many from the 1920s and 1930s. Besides Tudors in various shapes and sizes, Italianate, Georgian and Mediterranean styles are represented, often on the same block, helping streets avoid a cookie-cutter look. Neighborhoods often align with school districts, like Greenacres and Quaker Ridge. Properties west of Post Road tend to have bigger yards — sometimes more than five acres — than those to the east.



5 CORNELL STREET |
A four-bedroom, four-
and-a-half-bathroom
house on 1.32 acres, with
a pool and views of a golf
course, listed for \$1.499
million. 914-450-5106
Tony Cenicola/The New York
Times

What You'll Pay

A lot. On Nov. 21, there were 99 single-family houses for sale at an average list price of \$2.84 million, according to multiple listing service data prepared by Angela Retelny, an associate broker with Compass.

The priciest was a six-bedroom colonial-style house on nearly two acres in the Murray Hill section, built in 2012, with an outdoor pool and indoor basketball court, listed for \$8.995 million. The least expensive was a three-bedroom Victorian from 1894 with a front porch, for \$749,000.

If activity is brisk, prices are soft. Through September of this year, 206 single-family homes changed hands, Ms. Retelny said, compared with 177 in the same period in 2018. But the average sale price through September was \$1.61 million, she said, versus \$1.85 million a year ago — a drop of 13 percent.

Federal tax law changes enacted in 2017, which sharply limited local property-tax deductions, have battered the market, brokers said.



3 BLACK BIRCH LANE
| A three-bedroom, two-bathroom split-level ranch house, built in 1960, with hardwood floors and a walk-out basement, listed for \$685,000. 914-643-1367

The Vibe

Quaint, walkable and lined with the kind of mom-and-pop shops towns crave — like the independent Bronx River Books, which opened last year — Scarsdale’s downtown doesn’t have much in the way of night life. “Too many jewelers, banks and real estate offices” is how the town’s 2010 comprehensive plan put it, and not much seems to have changed since then.

But a 2.5-acre parcel with a parking garage and lots known as the Freightway Site, whose fate has been debated since the 1920s, may finally get a major makeover, with apartments, stores and parking. As of late November, officials had narrowed down a list of private development proposals to those of two

finalists: AvalonBay Communities and the team of LCOR and East End Capital. The winning plan will be announced next spring.

Platform tennis, a paddle game played in the winter, was invented in Scarsdale, and courts still dot the town, as at Brite Avenue Park. But the outdoor highlight might be the Bronx River Parkway Reservation, an 807-acre linear park whose Garth Woods section brushes Scarsdale, where an Adirondack-style footbridge takes in a waterfall.



Mom-and-pop stores dot Scarsdale's downtown. Bronx River Books, a year-old establishment, holds twice-weekly readings. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The Schools

The Scarsdale Union Free School District, which enrolled about 4,750 students in the 2018-19 school year, has five elementary schools, which run from kindergarten to fifth grade. The smallest last year was Greenacres, with 350 students; the largest was Quaker Ridge, with 485. The single middle school, for sixth through eighth grade, enrolled 1,125.

On last year's state exams, administered in grades three through eight, 85 percent of students met standards in English, versus 45 percent statewide. In math, 88 percent met standards, versus 47 percent statewide. On last year's SATs, students averaged 676 in evidence-based reading and writing and 705 in math, compared with 531 and 533 statewide.

Scarsdale High School, in a distinguished red-brick building, has a 99 percent graduation rate; 97 percent of students go on to a four-year college. The Scarsdale Alternative School, an 82-student school-within-a-school, incorporates internships and a senior project.



Scarsdale's high school is on Post Road, in an elegant early-20th-century building. Many buyers cite the town's schools as a reason for relocating. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The Commute

About 45 percent of residents commute by public transportation, according to the most recent census figures.

The Harlem Line of Metro-North Railroad stops in Scarsdale. Eleven trains leave between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. on weekdays. The longest trip takes 51 minutes; the shortest takes 32. Monthly fares are \$278. Most nearby parking spaces require a permit, which is \$1,000 a year.

Several county Bee-Line bus lines also serve Scarsdale, including Nos. 63 and 66, which loop across the village to the train station. The fare, payable by MetroCard, is \$2.75.



The Bronx River flows along the Bronx River Parkway, Scarsdale's western border. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The History

In 1858, William Bailey Lang, an iron merchant, built Rowsley, a veranda-lined house modeled after one in Derbyshire, England. Since 1928 the house, on the National Register of Historic Places, has been home to the Scarsdale Woman's Club,

which grew out of the suffrage movement and today holds book readings, wine tastings and jazz concerts. The gnarled white oak on its front lawn is thought to be almost 500 years old.

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