

Airbnb party houses stir up trouble for elegant Bath

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Will Humphries

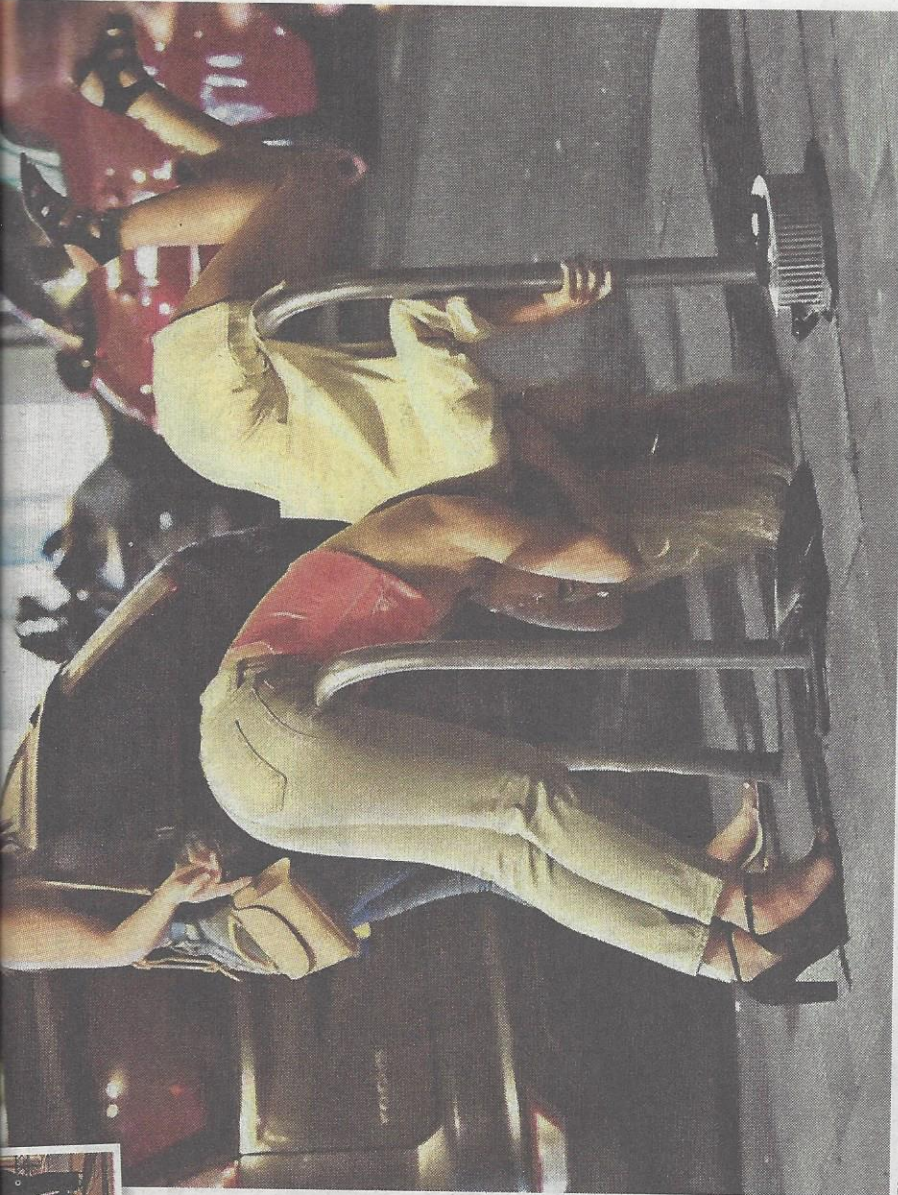
Inflatable sex dolls hanging from windows, dance music pumping through the walls and screaming arguments at midnight. It would be enough to make Jane Austen reach for the smelling salts.

The genteel streets of Bath, once home to the Regency author, are being ruined by an influx of "party houses" rented out on sites such as Airbnb, councillors have complained. Analysis of the Airbnb and Home Away websites shows that the number of short-term lets has increased from 476 in 2016 to more than 1,450 this year.

Those who live in Bath are calling for powers to stem the tide of short-term lets, which they say is hollowing out the long-term housing stock and leaving neighbours at their wits' end. David

Wood, a Liberal Democrat councillor, said: "Because Airbnbs aren't licensed, like many local authorities Bath and North East Somerset council has no special powers to restrict them or deal with the problems they can cause. We want to see the government change the rules on Airbnbs so they can be controlled better."

Alastair Libby, an artist whose neighbour turned the Georgian town-house flat below him into an Airbnb, said he spent 18 months living a nightmare. "The worst element is the uncertainty of not knowing who is going to be there, you are on tenterhooks," he said. "Because it's a converted house the soundproofing already isn't great. There were ten people below me once and it was mayhem. There would be screaming rows and you wouldn't know who the hell it was." Mr Libby said that



Short-term lets and party houses in Bath are causing noise, litter and reducing housing stock, says Robin Kerr, below

Cities fight back

Cities across the world are trying to tackle the growth of Airbnb rentals, which is eating up housing stock:

- Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Bordeaux, Brussels, Krakow, Munich, Paris, Valencia and Vienna have demanded more help from the EU
- Santa Monica in California wiped out 80 per cent of its Airbnbs in 2015 by requiring owners to live in the property during the renter's stay and register for a business licence
- In 2015 there were crackdowns on secondary apartments in Paris set up specifically as short-term rentals, with officials fining violators up to €25,000
- In 2016, Barcelona gave Airbnb an €600,000 fine for listing unlicensed apartments

the landlord changed the flat to a long-term rental after repeated complaints. David Gumbleton, a local businessman in Bath to be banned by the council from renting out his property as a holiday let after noise complaints. Mr Gumbleton had been letting it to groups of up to 16 people for more than five years but said that "vexatious complaints" from two sisters had led the council to shut him down.

"In the first year or two we didn't have any rules, which is probably when the damage was done," he said. "But the last three years we put rules in and they have got stricter each year." He said if the council worked with short-term let owners to produce a set of regulations it would solve the problem.

Robin Kerr, chairman of the Federation of Bath Residents Associations, said that about 90 flats in the city were being let as "party houses" for seven or more people, up from an estimated 48

in 2017. Neighbours are complaining about noise, litter and loss of community. He said that there were about 1,500 smaller short-term lets in Bath used by tourists. "That is 1,500 less residential homes in Bath for people who live and work here," Mr Kerr said. "No one is saying there should be no short-term lets but councils are finding their housing stock is being destroyed."

Mr Kerr said that owners should have to apply for planning permission to change from residential to short-term lets, allowing locals to have a say, with a compulsory registration scheme. Merilee Karr, founder of the short-term accommodation association, said that councils got publicity by complaining about Airbnb and short-term lets but could not prove they caused more noise and antisocial behaviour than long-term tenants. The association has an accreditation scheme outlining best practice, which it wants all short-term let owners to sign up to.