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## Time and Place: psychologist Oliver James on childhood in Cornwall

**The psychologist and author Oliver James, 54, has fond memories of idyllic childhood summers spent in a Cornish bolt hole where things went bump in the night. He still holidays in the family cottage with his wife, Clare, and two children, Olive, 5, and Louis, 2**



Graeme Whitcroft

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I've been coming to our family holiday home at Daymer Bay, on the Camel estuary, north Cornwall, all my life. The first time was in 1953, when my mother was pregnant with me. In fact, apart from the odd absence, such as when I was at university, I've spent more happy summers there than I care to remember – even though it was at least an eight-hour car journey from where we lived in St John's Wood, northwest London.

Our parents used to wake me and my three sisters up at three or four in the morning and put us in the back of the car. We used to go every summer for the whole eight weeks, as well as Easter and sometimes Christmas, too. There were no motorways in those days, just A-roads, and the journey seemed to take for ever. I used to dread it, because I was always carsick – at least three or four times per trip – and usually felt terrible.

The story goes that my parents, Martin and Lydia, were told it was a good place to go if you had small children. A local farmer recommended one particular detached house, Singleton, which overlooked the estuary, for a holiday rental. My parents rented it initially before buying it in the early 1950s; I think they paid a few thousand pounds. What a good buy it turned out to be – it must be worth more than a million now.

It was built in 1924, with pebbledash outside and garden all around it, just a couple of minutes' walk from the beach. It's a large house, divided in half, with lots of attics for playing in and seven bedrooms – three at the front and four at the back.

I'm the third of four children, and my siblings are all sisters, but, even though there was enough space for all of us to have our own bedroom, I sometimes shared with one of them because I was terrified of the dark and all the strange noises there: the wind, the sea and the sound of birds scurrying around. It's a stunningly beautiful area, encapsulated in verse by John Betjeman, who is buried in the local church, St Enodoc. Padstow is just a short walk and ferry ride away, and there's a great golf course nearby, where I now spend a lot of my time.

I've got lots of great memories – such as surfing on wooden planks, sailing in my father's old boat and

playing tennis for hours on end at a nearby court – but two in particular stand out. My favourite thing was to climb out of one of the upstairs bedroom windows onto the tiled roof. I'd sit at the top of the house, gazing out to the sea and beach, just soaking up the atmosphere on a hot summer's day. The other memory is of building a fort in the garden with my sister Lucy, who is 18 months younger than me. We'd get as many pieces of wood as we could find and spend a lot of the holiday playing war games and hide-and-seek – great fun.

Over the years, the beach has become increasingly popular, but I remember it more as being quiet: just a few locals mixed with people like us, who had holiday homes. We were never short of company or things to do. A lot of our friends and even neighbours in London bought nearby. And it's now the kind of place where we're always bumping into people we know.

Until I became a teenager, I used to really look forward to going there. When I hit my teens, of course, I thought it was a complete washout, with nothing to do. That seems odd now, because in the early 1980s it became the place for teens to go. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

My sisters still own the house – our parents are dead – and between us we use it a lot. In fact, there have been times when all four of us have been there with our children.

The upstairs has been reorganised a bit, but, apart from that, it's pretty much the same as it always was, even down to the old-fashioned Edwardian wildlife paintings on the wall, which came with the house when my parents bought it.

I take my own children there, and they love it as much as I did when I was their age, although, like all small children, they don't really like picnics on the beach – especially sand in their sandwiches. One of the reasons it's always been so popular with families with young children is that it's safe: the bay is flat and the beach is long and sandy. On a normal day, the waves are as gentle as can be.

We go as a family for three weeks during the summer, and the area and coastline are as beautiful as ever – all I can say is, thank goodness for the National Trust. I can see myself going there for the rest of my days.

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