



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

Giving up *giving up* used to be the mantra in the Hudson household. But there's one resolution that many a country dweller ought to consider, Jules suggests

Well 2015 is finally here, and I'm sure the nation as a whole is doing well maintaining those New Year's resolutions. For my part, I'd long given up on these earnest plans, for the simple reason that my willpower has always had the breaking strain of a Kit Kat. But this year I've made an exception. I'm not going to kid myself that I'm going to give up on booze or biscuits, but I am determined to reduce our intake of something we've been hooked on for years and that's been a feature of every home I've ever lived in: oil.

Ever since we moved into our lovely, rambling, crumbling old house, we've agonised over what is, in many properties, one of its real selling points: the Aga. Our 'Aga Saga' has waxed and waned along the lines of a certain song; should it stay or should it go? But don't get me wrong, I LOVE an Aga. Having one in the home is a great help in selling it, take it from me. And there's nothing quite as welcoming as the wall of heat that hits you as you walk into the kitchen on a chilly winter's morning. We revere them as if they were a culinary altar before which we should all pay our respects, while the dishes that have made them famous are a delight to enjoy.

But here's the rub – the costs involved in running one, particularly an oil-fired version, are eye-watering. With a consumption of around 3,000 litres a year, it's a pretty extravagant way to fry an egg, let alone roast a joint. So what to do? How best to achieve that now classic look, feel and purpose of a range, without draining what's left of the North Sea's black gold?

I'm often asked by our buyers on *Escape to the Country* to identify the best way to fuel and run a country home, and in truth I don't believe there's one solution. Propane gas and oil tanks mean you don't have to be on the mainline grid, and many homeowners are now making the best of recent advances in solar technology to supplement their hot water and electricity supply. Over the years I've used most of these, but there remains one source I'd never wish to be without, and that's wood.

I'm a firm believer in using a variety of fuels. A gas top on the hob is immediate and cheap, and if the power goes off you've always got a meal and a cup of tea to hand. Oil or gas is fine if you've got a

tankful before the worst of the weather might hit, and with oil prices falling, now is a really good time to take advantage of historically low rates. But at the end of the day I'm never happier than when I can look into the wood store and feel confident that therein is a year's supply that'll keep us warm and fed whatever happens.

It's this passion for wood and all the benefits it brings to the environment that has finally drawn our

“ There's nothing quite as welcoming as the wall of heat that hits you on a chilly winter's morning ”

Aga Saga to a close. We've replaced it with a wood stove from Esse called an Ironheart. It keeps the kitchen warm and will casserole a treat. It consumes all we prune and chop up throughout the year, and in many ways marks a growing return to solid fuel in kitchens, which I'm seeing a lot more of year on year. Sales of solid-fuel ranges are up, and more models are coming out. Of course nothing is perfect, and you do need to be in a position to satisfy their appetite for timber, but it's a great way to try and cut down on the energy bills.

When Shackleton set off for the Antarctic, he took an Esse with him. It's still there in the expedition's beautifully preserved hut. His was fuelled by coal and anything else of no further use that would burn. So it's ironic that today, the greatest threat to that region is from planned oil exploration, while many other places are in crisis because of our thirst for it.

So if we could all give up just a bit more oil this year, you never know. We might just help make the planet a little safer, and a little cleaner.

• *Black Sheep is hungover*

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archaeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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