

# High-flyer who fell out of love with City life gets a different kind of buzz with Plan Bee

Lucy Bannerman

The best jobs in the country ... are in the country.

Charles Millar knows that now, of course, but rare is the schoolchild who grows up wanting to be a bee inspector. Rarer still is the handsomely paid management consultant and corporate high-flyer who flicks through the situations vacant in the bee-keeper's monthly digest, *Beecraft*, and decides to give up a London salary for something that pays a tenth as much.

Mr Millar — official title: Regional Bee Inspector for the West of England — speaks with the glee of a man who has been let in on a great secret. It is a secret he shares with a harbourmaster in Devon, a head gardener in Cumbria, a deerstalker in the Highlands and several others named in *Country Life* as the people with the ten best jobs in the countryside.

With nearly a million 16 to 24-year-olds out of work, many are being forced to explore alternative career paths. It doesn't get much more alternative than bee inspecting, said Mr Millar,

who jumped off the corporate ladder, having worked for Unilever, overseeing a significant global share of shampoo, soap and toothpaste consumption, and then as a financial controller at a Mayfair investment company.

"In my early 30s, I was supercharged," said Mr Millar. "I was highly focused on status and career progression. It was onwards and upwards. I was making a fortune."

The career trajectory veered off course when he fell out with the boss of his final company. "I call it a strategic disagreement," he joked. "He owned the company and I got fired."

Then 52, having worked freelance as a management consultant and moved to rural Shropshire, he saw the advert for a bee inspector. He had met one before, through his own amateur bee keeping. "I thought, 'that sounds like a great job. Somebody is going to pay me money to visit orchards and look at hives and meet nice bee-keepers who might give me a cup of tea. That sounds like a great time'."

Mr Millar, now 56, travels about 200-300 miles a week — "I don't see





you up a lot." The sense of being part of something bigger than your own ambition is shared by Roy Lingard, 60, head forester of two estates in Yorkshire and Derbyshire, and one of the *Country Life* Top Ten. "There's a sense of purpose in creating a legacy that will last for decades, if not centuries," he said.

There are the obvious downsides of an outdoor life. "The fight with the weather," said Gary Coutts, 46, head stalker at Balmoral. "In 1983, it got down to -27C; we even had frost in the house." And the perks. For George Inglis, 60, the Duke of Northumberland's ghillie in the Borders, it's "seeing people's enjoyment when they catch a fish, especially when a novice lands their first salmon on their first day on the river. That really gets me".

For Mr Millar: "It's the peace, really."

His wife, Catherine, also gave up her job as a teacher, and is now a freelance film producer. Their 20-year-old eldest son is happy, working at a diner in Brighton. Their 18-year-old son is "having a great time" working for a company that makes fitness equipment. Only their 16-year-old daughter, currently doing her GCSEs, is considering a traditional profession. "She might go off and do medicine," he said. "Maybe it's rubbed off on them. Maybe they are not as driven."

He looks back on his previous life, and is baffled. "I'm now perplexed as to my career ambition back then. It's bizarre — I seemed happy at the time. I was quite an alpha male. Being in such a competitive environment, maybe I was responding to the behaviour of hunter-gatherers."

That man has gone. "I see myself as a different me."

motorways" — checking hives for foul-brood, the bee equivalent of foot and mouth. "It was first identified by Aristotle," he explained. "There are some wonderful moments, when you're in the sunshine, in a beautiful orchard in Hereford, going through the bees. I get to do my hobby as a job and am probably fitter now than I was at 35. My personal space is now ten miles wide."

He reckons he is earning "about a fifth of what I used to earn, but that's without inflation, so probably about a tenth in real terms". But the biggest change was less expected.

"It's to do with seeing myself as less of an individual and more as a part of something bigger. I know it's not a career. It's a lowly job. I'm not thinking of the next move, I'm not being political. I can say what I like. It frees

