

the folks next door

While we are physically closer to our neighbours than yesteryear, neighbourhood relations are becoming increasingly distanced. What's going on, asks **Sarah Lang**

In Point England Road, which borders working-class Auckland suburb Glen Innes, state houses and roller-door shops proliferate. At number 90, the front yard is almost entirely swallowed by a caravan, old trucks piled with paint cans, washing baskets, old furniture, a fridge – and that's just the stuff visible at a glance.

A few houses down at number 79, Mafelda Wilson is "disgusted" by the house and its owner-occupier of six years, fellow pensioner William Bartlett. Claiming that other incensed neighbours are too scared to speak out, Wilson has complained to the council numerous times but has never grumbled to Bartlett directly "because I just can't be bothered with him; he thinks he's the King of Pt England".

Her allegations include that the fire brigade made him clear out his "fire-hazard" section, that there's a rat infestation, that he's assaulted two neighbours who complained, and that one neighbour was so fed up with the view she moved out.

Although he admits that's why the neighbour shifted, Bartlett denies the other charges. He accuses Wilson of being a lying "troublemaker from way back" who's been trying to make perfectly happy neighbours sign a get-rid-of-Bill petition. Bartlett admits his yard's been a mess while he's attended to other priorities, including voluntary work and looking after sick friends.

Auckland City Council says that for more than a year it has given Bartlett numerous deadlines to clear up or face court proceedings; Bartlett says he complies with the requests but then, "I stuff up and it gets messy again." After an April hearing, the council issued a

court order for a clear-up. Bartlett grumpily maintains that he's part-way through the clear-out and is building a fence to shield the rest of it from view. "I just want the whole thing to go away."

No one wants to be perpetually next door like on *Neighbours'* Ramsay St, gossiping about each other as on *Desperate Housewives*, being irritatingly altruistic like the Flanders from *The Simpsons*, and God forbid we should be as wrapped up in each other's lives as the folks on *Coro*. But are we instead living in little pods of bubble-wrap, each insulated from the next?

We get a quick peek over the fence in Colmar Brunton's nationwide study "State of our Neighbourhood". It found that while eight percent of us have no contact and a third have regular contact, most (47 percent) have only occasional contact with neighbours. Meanwhile, only 42 percent said there's probably or definitely a sense of community in their neighbourhood.

The overriding reason seems to be time pressure. With people working longer days and more years (often well past 65), many of us can't find, or make, the time to stop in next door for a cuppa.

Artist/musician Christian Nicolson, 37, made a concerted effort to befriend the neighbours after moving into quiet Tipau Street in Torbay on Auckland's North Shore two years ago with wife Kirianne, and then-newborn twins Grete and Skye. The neighbours' friendliness made a welcome change from well-heeled Takapuna "where I never felt like I could even say hello, let alone borrow a

"It's easy to assume a person's not friendly when they don't come over and talk. But often people are shy and just need encouragement"

PHOTOGRAPHS: JESSIE CASSON



Neighbours: Christian and Kirianne Nicolson with twins Grete and Skye. Steve Howard with Beth, and Penny Howard

muffin tin." Now the family sees their neighbours – Penny, Steve, and their six kids on one side of the fence, and Karen, Mik and their two kids on the other – every day. And not just because their children are playmates. "They bake us cookies, give us leftover food, look after the babies," says Nicolson. "But it's not about what they give us but the attitude they have towards the people who surround them. It's good to know we have good neighbours who we can trust if we need them, even if it's just for a few minutes."

Other neighbours drop in with fruit and bread, trim the hedges of a neighbour in her 80s and, after a recent barbecue, a street party is being planned. "If I'd been stand-offish in the beginning it may have been a little different," mulls Nicolson. "It's easy to assume a person's not friendly when they don't come over and start talking, but they probably feel the same about you. Often people are shy and just need a little encouragement."

Preconceptions about who makes a good neighbour can get in the way of that initial approach. A 2008 survey from alrealestate.co.nz found we consider the "best neighbours" to be childless couples, followed by retirees, families with young children, singles and then pet owners. Meanwhile, the worst neighbours were thought to be squatters, followed by students (with their loud parties), shared houses (flats), and families with teenage children (again, probably the blazing stereos). It's all about protecting our eardrums – and our privacy.

In our roomy country, many of us live in relatively spacious surroundings, but with back-section houses supplanting backyards, we're often physically closer to our neighbours than yesteryear.

This proximity can spawn a craving for seclusion, especially among those slotted like sardines in apartment blocks. Prominent architect Ian Athfield has pointed out that more houses are being built inwards rather than outwards for privacy. And it's not just in the Remuera and Fendalton areas that houses are guarded by a high fence, lofty hedges and security keypads. In a holiday-home settlement near Taupo, a retired couple has few permanent neighbours. When the next-door neighbours recently built a deck which meant that, theoretically, they could glimpse the couple's kitchen, the couple planted trees to shield them.

Others are retreating into gated communities: not retirement villages, but subdivisions that are essentially enclosures, many with security gates, cameras and only one way in and out. Mushrooming Acacia Park in Whangarei is described on its website as "an exclusive, gated community... Residents enjoy more privacy and security. Landowners have remote control units to gain access to the park. Visitors can come in by entering a code at the gate. This arrangement keeps unauthorised visitors out."

"They irk me no end!" says Waikato University sociologist Dr Maxine Campbell of gated communities. "If we're becoming less social at the individual level, gated communities seem to me to be a collective manifestation of the same behaviour. It's not good for a city to create such physical 'them and us' divisions." She likens it to shouting 'stay out, we don't trust you'.

And we don't trust our neighbours like we used to. In the latest New Zealand Study of Values (part of the World Values Survey of 60 countries), there were



The girls nip through a hole in the hedge to play in each other's gardens

"If we're becoming less social at the individual level, gated communities seem to be a collective manifestation of this behaviour. It's not good to create such physical 'them and us' divisions"

only a few percentage points between our rates of trusting people in general and trusting neighbours. Dr Paul Perry, the study's principal investigator and Massey University sociology professor, has witnessed a decline in neighbourliness over the 25-plus years he and his

wife have lived in Palmerston North. "We once knew the neighbours on either side well and interacted with them a reasonable amount. Now I don't know their names and doubt I'd recognise them if I passed them on the street." In this era of relative transience and high neighbour turnover, he reckons we're less likely to bother establishing what's likely to be a short-term relationship.

In Auckland's Mt Eden, where rundown units hunch apologetically next to stately family homes, Kate Potts lives in a block of units separated only by walls. The 38-year-old TV producer often runs into neighbours en route to the communal carpark. "I say hello, because we're literally passing each other by centimetres, and I'm shocked at how often people pretend you're invisible. Most attempts at conversations are met with looks of discomfort and make me feel like a Martian. Plus the smokers on the top level throw their butts down to the doorsteps of those on the lower level."

Potts says she was nearly run over in the driveway recently by neighbours. >>



Next-door friendship: Steve Howard and Christian Nicolson

"They thought I was waving hello – God forbid! – so they sped past, missing me by inches. I couldn't believe it and yelled out, but they didn't stop, look around or even acknowledge it. It was bloody rude. Maybe they didn't grow up on the *Sesame Street* anthem 'It's the people in your neighbourhood' like me, but I suspect most just think they can get away with ignoring others and it's easier that way." She reckons the lack of neighbourliness could come down to differences in age and culture. "But how hard is it to say hello? It's sad, really. It would be much easier if we just looked out for each other."

In the countryside, where people are more physically isolated, neighbourly relationships are usually much stronger. Rural families rely on their neighbours. Take Amanda Henriksen and husband Michael, who run a deer farm in Hororata, Canterbury. A mother of two-year-old twin boys and a newborn son, the 29-year-old ticks off why the neighbour relationship is a bastion of farming life: they provide a helping hand, safety and "the social contact that keeps you sane". The Henriksens regularly stop into neighbours' places for a cuppa or a beer, and recently attended a RD2 Darfield pot-luck street party. When people go away, neighbours look after each other's stock; and when the Henriksens' deer went AWOL in 2006's country-blanketing snowstorm, the

"Maybe they didn't grow up on the *Sesame Street* anthem 'It's the people in your neighbourhood' like me. But how hard is it to say hello? It's sad"

neighbours rallied around to find them. Neighbourliness is also stronger in small towns, largely due to a stronger sense of community.

Shouting abuse over the fence is more common than you might think. Local TV show *Neighbours at War* has easily found enough fodder for three seasons so far, and this year a spate of neighbour spats has hogged headlines. In January in Lower Hutt, armed police arrested two neighbours who'd threatened each other with a baseball bat and a BB-gun. In February, a Wanganui woman allegedly bashed to death her neighbour, a 44-year-old mother with cerebral palsy; the same month in Whangarei, a woman allegedly bit off the tip of her neighbour's finger after she'd refused to lend her a lawnmower.

A study published in Sociological Research Online found that neighbour disputes are based on "the unwanted and unavoidable sights and sounds of other people's intimate lives". Common quarrels are over shared fences and driveways, trees, property damage, rubbish and, most notably, noise. It seems if we don't know the neighbours well enough to be comfortable broaching an issue, what begins as an inconvenience can easily turn ugly.

If you've got a noisy neighbour, Plimmerton filmmaker/producer Tony Sutorius recommends the revenge he took after a neighbour's son blasted "the worst conceivable rock" for days on end. His Noisy Neighbour Resource Kit, a template letter, and the "amazingly-awful" *Neighbours* theme-song he played "on infinite repeat at maximum, bowel-shaking volume" is downloadable from his www.unreal.co.nz website.

In a slightly shabby, state house-studded street, Mt Albert's Range View Road, a feud has been running for 14 years between number 39 and its neighbours. Matriarch Sharon Salt and her nine children have been accused by neighbours of urinating on fences, shooting fireworks and throwing bottles at neighbours. In February, just before Salt was due to appear before the Tenancy Tribunal in Housing NZ's third attempt to evict her, she agreed to move out voluntarily. Concerned about stirring up trouble or making things worse, the Salts' neighbours won't talk on the record about their problem neighbours because they don't want to have to move. And they aren't the only ones.

While neighbourliness might be a stress to maintain, it can be more of a stress to do without. Dr Perry observes: "Help, if needed, is harder to get. The old 'eyes-on-the-street' idea probably has some real value so security in the home, or at least the sense of it, may be diminished. The irony is that many people rue the decline of neighbourliness and seek a greater sense of community, yet take individual actions that work against these things."

Most of us actually do want a stronger relationship with our neighbours. Colmar Brunton's study found that 72 percent are interested in getting to know our neighbours better, and 65 percent consider themselves willing to get involved in community projects. Many of us really do mean to get around to introducing ourselves or stopping in, but just haven't found, or made, the time – or it never seems like the *right* time.

But, with a bit of effort, neighbourliness could just make a comeback. ■