

The Economist

JUNE 18TH-24TH 2005

www.economist.com

Britain's struggling newspapers

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To leave or not to leave Iraq?

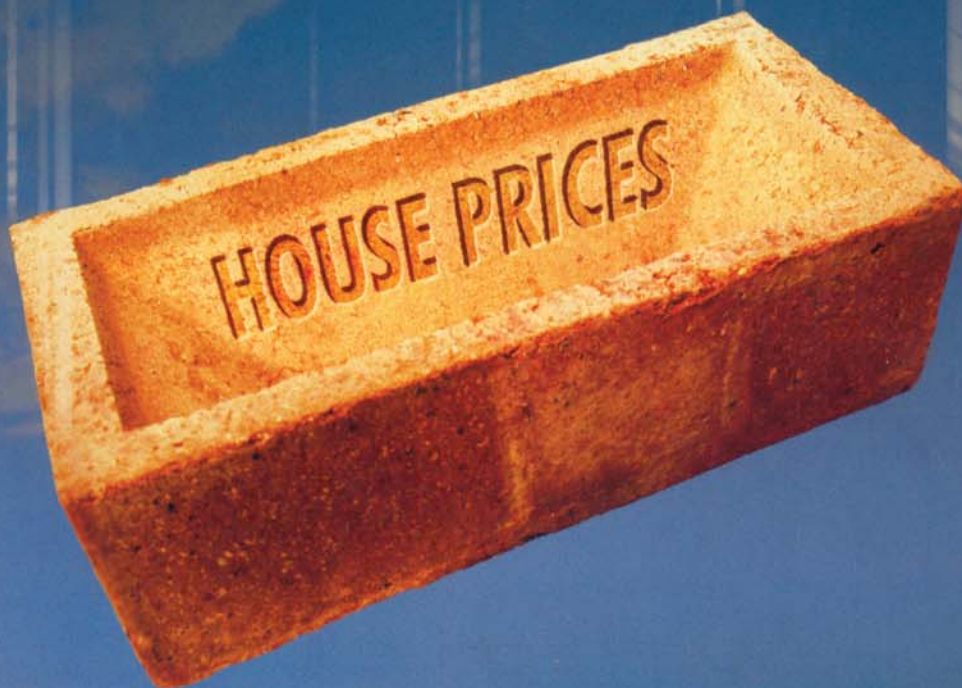
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A SURVEY, AFTER PAGE 54



After the fall



The Economist

Chinese tourists

Footfall

BICESTER, OXFORDSHIRE

An early indication of what Chinese tourists like about Britain

JAPANESE tourists bearing credit cards loaded with yen transformed the fortunes of British tourism in the 1980s, and also rescued a handful of rather fusty British luxury brands. So the arrival of a new supply of Asian tourists, this time from China, is arousing some excitement. At the moment, Chinese visitors can travel to Britain only on business or student visas. But from the end of July, they will be allowed to visit Britain as tourists, thanks to an agreement signed by the British and Chinese governments earlier this year.

What might these people want to do when they are here? An early and rather bizarre indication came this week, when a group of 2,000 door-to-door salespeople who hawk Amway household cleaning products in China were brought to Britain as a reward for flogging exceptional quantities of bottles containing stuff for cleaning sinks. They were not on tourist visas, but their itinerary—London, Oxford, shopping—was more like that of tourists than of the wealthy businessmen and cash-strapped students who can already visit.

The trip took 700 of them to Bicester Village, a collection of designer-outlet stores near Oxford. Though many of the most expensive fashion brands have shops at Bicester, the only place where it

was difficult to get through the door was Clarks, makers of frumpy but sensible shoes for British adults and schoolchildren. Some of the shoppers were filling suitcases with the shoes. During a previous Amway visit, the store had to hire security guards to restrict entry to the store. Why the crush?

Oddly, Clarks shoes are apparently seen as luxury items in China. The company reckons that the brand, which has been around since 1825, may be helped by its lingering colonial associations. Its presence in Hong Kong when the Chinese market was opening up may also have allowed it to get its products into smart department stores before the competition: although many of the shoes are made in Guangdong, they are pricier there than in Bicester. Evidently much planning had gone into the shopping expedition: some shoppers brought pieces of string cut to the length of a friend's shoe to get the size right, others brought cardboard cut-outs of a child's foot.

The Britons present were bemused by this frenzy, but the incomprehension may be mutual. Market research by Visit Britain, a government agency, says that along with beautiful scenery and bits of castle, Chinese tourists coming to Britain expect to find friendly local people and delicious regional cooking.