

This buyer's agent and TV host has made the most of an enduring passion for property, writes Deborah Light

Master of the house

BRYCE HOLDAWAY watches as Australia's property market fizzes and boils. With interest rates at 60-plus-year lows, real estate investment has been so hot in some spots it's making many financial observers jumpy, including our supreme regulator, the Reserve Bank, which recently upgraded its fire danger rating to extreme by foreshadowing some form of lending restraint before year end.

Holdaway is a little-known breed; a buyer's agent, specialising in investment property, buying for clients and sometimes for himself. He's seen many cycles over the 16 years he's been in the business. As a property professional – also host of the Lifestyle's popular real estate program *Location Location Location Australia* – Holdaway has seen markets around the country overheat, then collapse, with many buyers caught in the freeze.

This time there are danger zones in Melbourne and Sydney but the heat isn't evenly spread around the country, making it tricky for authorities to regulate nationally without punishing buyers and markets outside those two blazing state capitals, Holdaway believes. And this time it's the plight of those first-home buyers that worries Holdaway. "There are a lot of people finding it hard to get on the ladder."

A director and partner of Melbourne investment firm Empower Wealth, Holdaway believes current pressures are changing property landscapes in those

BRYCE HOLDAWAY

Age 39. Lives at Ashburton in Melbourne's south-east.

Property buyer's agent, director and one of three partners of financial advisory service, Empower Wealth, professional speaker, co-host of Lifestyle channel's *Location Location Location Australia*. First jobs, paper round and basketball coach for his Perth high school.

cities, with inner and middle-ring suburbs moving perhaps forever beyond the scope of first-home buyers, including families. "Those are going to be where investors and the double-income professionals keep buying. Self-managed super funds now have direct property in them, so that's underpinning it as well."

Still, as you might expect, Holdaway is upbeat, energetic, like he is about most things. Besides, he has a few ideas for aspiring home owners: "Compromise practicality for a better asset. Maybe consider buying a one-bedroom apartment in a really in-demand suburb – which compromises your space and probably doesn't have your ideal view. It's likely to mean that the next property you buy is going to be a substantially better one because you made the right decision on the first one."

He also cautions against common mistakes. "The sun won't shine this bright forever. Long-term interest rates average

roughly 7.25% but they [buyers] are not testing their budgets at that. They're testing it at their low-point introductory level of 4.99%, so I think they could get into financial haemorrhage if they don't plan for interest rates to rise, which they eventually will." Some buyers don't plan far enough ahead, he believes, citing young couples investing in small apartments that would quickly be unsuitable should they start a family.

A major gripe: most often buyers simply won't do the slog. "Searching is not researching," he says. "Just because you've been on the internet portals doesn't mean you know the market. You've got to pound the pavement. Understand that buying a property isn't just doing 'open for inspections', you have to pull a team together – your building and pest [inspectors], your solicitor – upfront. Know that the real estate agent isn't on your side, they're on the seller's side and embrace that. Get as much as you can from them then do your own independent research." This includes studying comparable sales in the district. "That way I don't get seduced, waste my time, energy and effort by what the price guide is, because I actually know what it is." Holdaway also recommends checking out auctions. "Heaps of people hate buying at auction so understand how it works."

Holdaway has made mistakes, no question. His first investment property, with a partner in his home city of Perth, cost just under \$200,000. Trouble was, it was on a busy highway. Also, there were way too



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many in the complex, and then he found out his body corporate fees were covering services others enjoyed – lift, pool and caretaker – but his smaller block did not. Lessons learned.

Today he has three filters. There's owner-occupier appeal – “owner-occupiers buy with their hearts not their calculators”, says Holdaway, raising valuations among buyers in the future – also valuers. He also seeks scarcity – smaller unit blocks, houses not near land releases, which again boosts valuations. And lastly, he wants investment-grade property where, he says, “the suburb does most of the heavy lifting”. In determining this, he does homework to find what gives a suburb pulling power, observing these are the ones that usually attract big earners. “I want to know which suburbs have the highest income, because that'll drive growth.”

With stamp duty and legal expenses accounting for 5%-6% of the property price, Holdaway knows “it's expensive to get in and out” but he rarely gets out anyway, following advice from an early mentor who told him: “Never, ever sell.” Buyers shouldn't need to, he reckons, if their loans are structured effectively. Using interest-only loans and offset accounts, Holdaway bought his first home, a two-bedroom unit, on the Gold Coast aged 27 and owns it still – one of three investment properties he

has, outside his family home.

The son of an accountant, Holdaway grew up in Perth with an older sister and a mother who worked in admin. He studied accounting largely for want of inspiration. “I stuffed around in Year 12, I wasn't really focused on what I wanted to do, and I kind of fell into accounting but it just wasn't dynamic enough.”

He found that sought-after inspiration in his early 20s when he heard about a book, *Building Wealth Through Investment Property*, by Jan Somers. “I went out and bought it, loved it, and that was it. I'm like a dog with a bone: if I need to find out something I'll ask and I'll read until I just get it. That started my journey.” Then he scouted out a property investment advisory group. “I just kept going every week and I'd learn and learn. Then I caught up with the bloke running it and said how can I get involved? He told me what to do.

When I look back it was crazy. A 23-year-old talking to 40- and 50-year-old people – double my age – helping them buy investment properties. They were buying into my energy and enthusiasm and ability to talk about concepts I love. It was an adrenalin rush and so much fun. Looking back now I think, jeez, I had some balls to do that.”

What might have increased his appeal was those clean-scrubbed, well-pressed

good looks. “What I quickly learned is that I've got that face,” he grins. “I'm the guy to bring home to mum, you know: I've got a trustworthy looking face.” In this business, it's also a boon to be “comfortable with numbers”, he says – and he is.

Holdaway followed his accounting degree by gaining a full real estate licence and his diploma in financial services. He loves learning. “I'm an absolute sponge.” A member of that wary Generation X, he can't remember a time he hasn't worked and believes he's typical, at least in attitudes to thrift. “I saw my parents go through the recession, and pay off a home during the recession, so I've got this everlasting imprint in my mind of being careful with money.”

After a career helping investors, Holdaway's recently turned his talents to assisting home buyers also, in part inspired by his current gig as co-host on the Lifestyle channel program, now in its third season. It gives him a buzz: “It's a different skill set but I love it. It's the biggest thing most people do and I get a genuine enthusiasm from being invited into it from the very first discussion. For me, it's all about the champagne clink at the end when they actually get what they want.”

On what Holdaway actually wants, it's always more time with his young family, which will be more achievable a couple of years down the track, Holdaway believes, when the business – employing 16 with more than 1000 clients – is bedded down and his nascent TV career is on track. Right now, “there's a lot of heads down, tails up stuff,” he says, adding with regret: “For 13 weeks of the year my wife Andrea is a single mother, and she does a really good job.”

Ask him what they will teach their young sons, Jack and Sam, Holdaway's emphatic that there'll be “no gifts, no handouts”. He has something else to offer. “You know that really cheesy, corny line that you should find something you love doing, and you will never work a day in your life? I'm actually going to teach them that. Because I now know enough that, no matter what industry they choose, I can help them plan their financial future. I wasn't passionate about accounting; as soon as I found property, I was passionate,” he beams. “I'm going to take the pressure off them. I'm going to encourage them to find out what puts a smile on their face.”