

# Decor encore

Always on the lookout for new ideas, **Glynis Shaw** shares some interior design wisdom from two owners in France who have successfully renovated their homes

Anyone looking for a home in France will fall somewhere between two camps – those looking for buildings with potential that require complete structural renovation, and those in search of the perfect home that has been completely refurbished and is ready to move into.

If you don't want to take on a massive project but you do want to stamp your own personality on the property, then you might be looking somewhere in between, for houses that are structurally sound but in need of some alteration and modernisation. Such properties can look and feel a bit depressing at first viewing, but if the location and property type are perfect for you, then they are worth considering. Of course, the price must be perfect too, leaving enough budget to install such necessities as a new kitchen and bathroom, and to either remove or reveal internal features like walls and fireplaces to create rooms that will suit your individual needs.

It is always worth having a house surveyed to check on such details as load-bearing walls, plumbing, drainage and wiring. Once you know what needs to be tackled, it's essential to make a programme of works, starting with the biggest, most disruptive tasks and only then painting, decorating and furnishing in line with your vision.

Here we meet two inspiring owners who both had a clear vision when they embarked on their successful projects. The first bought their farmhouse as a family home a few years ago and are now ready to pass it on to a new owner, while the second bought their cottage to run as a holiday let and are now opening it to guests. ■

Glynis Shaw is joint MD of French Connections online holiday rentals and property sales  
Tel: 01580 819303  
frenchconnections.co.uk



**For sale**

## Farmhouse in Lot

In 2003, Mary Warman and her husband were looking for a house in France that would make a comfortable home for themselves with enough room for their children and grandchildren to visit.

They fell in love with the *Hansel and Gretel* look of Caupels Farmhouse, situated in a hamlet of five traditional stone houses in northern Aveyron.

"The unspoilt location, thick walls, exposed beams and distinctive *lauze* roofing tiles really appealed to us," remembers Mary, "but the interior was outdated and not to our taste. At the time this part of France was still stuck in the style of the 1970s with hard brown and grey colours, artex finishes and harsh fluorescent lighting."

Mary's vision was to bring a much lighter, more open feel to the house and make more of its original features – and the couple planned to do most of the work themselves while living in the property.

"For the first two months we camped in the kitchen among rubble with taps on pipes and a bowl and gas ring on a picnic table. We knew then that we needed some professional help, but we didn't speak much French and couldn't get workmen to understand that we wanted a rustic look. In the end our kind neighbours told us where to go for the right artisans."

The first aim was to create a big family kitchen with a wood-burning stove and enough space for people and pets.

"At the time France still offered only dark

brown units or nothing," says Mary, "but eventually we found some nice pale wooden ones. We also removed wall tiles and the modern, shiny ceiling and put back beams in keeping with the 18th-century origins."

The living room ceiling beams were dark brown, so they were painted cream and the floor was carpeted to make it warmer in winter.

"We also had to carpet the concrete stairs to make them safe for toddlers."

The present master bedroom was originally two smaller rooms. "One morning I got up and realised I was really fed up with this, so before breakfast we knocked the dividing wall down. It felt wonderful."

Adjacent to the main house was a converted bake house, which the couple also renovated to create an open-plan, one-bedroom studio with its own garden.

The previous owners had kept horses and their dressage ring was the perfect location for a swimming pool. "The spoils and rubble from excavating the pool were used to level the lawn and create a flat children's play area," explains Mary. "It's easy to forget the expense of landscaping a garden when setting a renovation budget."

After many happy years at the farmhouse, Mary's husband sadly died and she has now put the farmhouse on the market, happy that a new family can move straight in and enjoy its beauty and the lifestyle it offers.

Caupels Farmhouse is on the market for £290,000, ID 200874 at frenchconnections.co.uk



Before breakfast one morning we knocked down the dividing wall between two small rooms – it felt wonderful!



**Holiday let**

**Bijou cottage in Burgundy**

Sharon and Gregoire Megret decided last year to expand their successful letting business by buying a second gîte close to their home in Venarey-les-Laumes in Burgundy's Côte-d'Or department. With a limited budget, they were delighted to find La Petite Maison – a cottage in need of what French estate agents call 'substantial refreshing'.

"The structure was sound and the layout was fine but in my view the house was uninhabitable," remembers Sharon. "The bathroom was grotesque, the kitchen was in a cupboard and rewiring was essential. But we had plenty of time to plan as inheritance issues delayed the completion of the sale for a frustrating 10 months."

Sharon's main vision for the house was to create a pretty home from home for guests that would be bright, stylish and comfortable, and would also offer good value for money. Also, very importantly, the rooms had to photograph well for marketing purposes.

Gregoire is local to the area and had been involved in several family renovations, so he took charge of planning the work, starting with the installation of a septic tank with the help of a neighbour and digger, being careful to follow planning rules and have the due permits signed off.

"It was terrifying seeing the garden ripped up, but worth it in the end. Our next big job was to remove the central chimney breast in the living room and that's where friends and cousins came into their own," smiles Sharon. "Everybody who came to help took away the bricks and materials they wanted for their own projects. Even our two daughters got involved, Lucy with her own little tool kit.

"Upstairs, I made sure both bedrooms had en-suite bathrooms, which is important if two couples stay in the house. Because this is a business, I was careful not to get carried away. I bought quality key items like mattresses and fully equipped the small kitchen but economised on pictures, for instance, by printing and framing old-fashioned French advertising posters found on the internet.

"I couldn't afford real French antiques so I searched for good reproduction furniture from French high street shops like Castorama and Maisons du Monde and then mixed these with modern items from the Ikea in Dijon.

"I like colour and character, so to avoid creating a white or magnolia box I used interesting wallpaper on feature walls. I also carried the colour into the garden furniture and accessories in order to co-ordinate the look."



I like colour and character, so to avoid creating a white or magnolia box I used interesting wallpaper on feature walls

What advice would Sharon give to new owners contemplating renovation? "Make an itinerary like a military plan, but be flexible with your schedule. The initial 10-month delay in buying was worth it in the end. Expect the construction work to feel as though you're taking three or four steps backwards – but trust that you will eventually get to do the nice work that puts your own stamp on the property. That's the part that is so fulfilling."

*La Petite Maison is available to rent from £414 a week, ID 163885 at frenchconnections.co.uk*