



Beams with pride



Having found this worn-out farmhouse in Vienne three decades ago, Sara and John Rowland now tell **Glynis Shaw** how they have injected it with rustic charm and lots of fun



It was in 1988 that Sara and John Rowland (pictured) first saw La Pinsonnerie, the secluded farmhouse and cottage that would become their home in France. The couple were on a cycling holiday in Poitou-Charentes, staying in St-Savin and touring around the villages. “We were charmed by the unspoilt nature of the area,” remembers Sara. “We would cycle all morning and then stop in a little bar and have a plate of oysters and a glass of wine for lunch. Everyone was so friendly and welcoming and at that point there were no English people to be seen.

“While we were there we looked at quite a lot of properties, being driven round by the local *notaire’s* wife who was the nearest thing to an estate agent we could find. Nothing really grabbed us until on the last day of our holiday, she told us about an old farmhouse with eight hectares of fields and woods on the edge of the *Plus Beau Village* of Angles-sur-l’Anglin. It was coming up for a forced sale because none of the 24 inheritors could agree on what to do with it and she said it was pretty tatty, nothing special, and we probably wouldn’t like it.

“We followed her car through the lanes at breakneck speed until suddenly we rounded the corner to see the Angles-sur-l’Anglin bridge straddling the river, at the foot of a cliff topped by a ruined castle. The view just took our breath away.

“At the top of a narrow lane was La Pinsonnerie. An L-shaped house stood behind ornate but shabby iron gates in a walled courtyard garden, with a large cottage at right angles, all surrounded by fields of wildflowers. It was fabulous.

We looked at each other and, as one, said to Madame: ‘*Vendu!*’

Rustic appeal
“Inside, there were just three habitable rooms – a kitchen with a large wood-burning range and two bedrooms but there was no bathroom or inside toilet,” the Rowlands recall. “Upstairs was the granary, while the other part of the L formation was just cowsheds and a loft.

“The cottage had a living room, kitchen and bedroom downstairs and upstairs was another granary. Outside in the courtyard we found a beautiful old bread oven which we later discovered had been used to make the bread for the whole village before the advent of a *boulangerie*.”

The Rowlands discovered that La Pinsonnerie, which was probably built in the early 1800s, had been a large farm of local importance. They began to encounter many older people in the markets, shops and bars who knew the house well and who had either worked there or had an older relative who had been employed by the farmer.

“One day, an old lady asked if she could pick some lime leaves for her tea infusions, explaining that she had been doing this all her life. She had grown up in the cottage and her parents had been servants to the farm owner.

“She showed us a rusty old wire on the wall and said that it had been attached to a bell which used to be rung from the main house to summon her parents.

“She also told us that her father had planted the beautiful horse chestnut tree in the courtyard and she, along with other local people, talked about hiding members of the Resistance in the lofts in World War II when the Germans were in the area, and of

people burying their treasure on the land. People have tremendous affection towards the house and a positive attitude to our stewardship of it.”

Born from a barn
Having bought the property, Sara and John started a mammoth renovation of the farmhouse and cottage, which are constructed of stone walls and oak beams.

First, they gutted the cowshed and incorporated it into the house, then they sorted out the wiring and plumbing and installed insulation, central heating and wood-burning stoves. In addition, John lovingly took up all the original terracotta tiles upstairs and downstairs, renewed the worn-out floors and then relaid the original tiles.

The farmhouse granary on the first floor was turned into a 30-foot living room with a woodburner plus a double bedroom, while downstairs became a large farmhouse kitchen/diner plus another double bedroom. The cowsheds downstairs were also converted and now the house is a spacious five-bedroom family home.

The cottage was extended, renovated and modernised to create a large living room, country kitchen, three double bedrooms and an office or fourth bedroom.

Outside, the couple installed a 12m swimming pool with a large terrace. The pool has underwater lighting and a heat exchanger worked by the main boiler for pool heating. The setting was complete when an artist friend painted an Italianesque fresco on the long wall beside the pool.

Stepping stones
“For several years we used La Pinsonnerie for summer holidays, often with lots of friends and their children,” Sara says. “We had wonderful times swimming in the river, having picnics and using the fishing boat we had bought. Evenings were spent sitting around a home-made barbecue while the children made camps in the outbuildings.

“Then, in 1992, we decided to move to France with our 10-year-

The good life

When farms like La Pinsonnerie were built, they were planned to be as self-sufficient as possible. There is a large cave (cellar) that runs under the length of the farmhouse, which was full of enormous wine vats when the Rowlands bought the property. In times past, everyone would make their own wine around here and the farm had plenty of space for vines, so could have produced enough wine for all the workers.

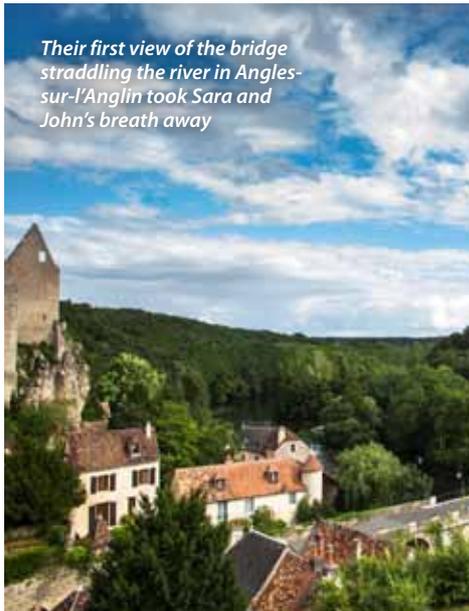
There are a number of large walnut trees in the property's fields and the walnuts are still taken to the local farmers' co-op to have oil made. The extensive woods are also full of oak trees and the practice has been maintained of cutting wood and stacking it in metre lengths to dry. At La Pinsonnerie, a local farmer has done this work in return for grazing his sheep in the fields. The wood cutting and stacking is an annual job undertaken by whole families and long walls of logs can still be seen on the roadsides. La Pinsonnerie has wood-burning stoves as well as central heating because it is economical to use the property's own wood to supplement the heating.



The thriving local villages offer excellent lunches



Their first view of the bridge straddling the river in Angles-sur-l'Anglin took Sara and John's breath away



old son. By then we had bought three more farmhouses which we intended to renovate and run as gîtes. These were the early days of tourism and transport links were not nearly as good as they are now; there was no TGV or Ryanair, for example, and no internet either.

"It was also very unusual for an English family to move into the area and *La Nouvelle Republique* published an article about us entitled '*Famille Anglaise s'installe dans La France profonde*'.

"My husband had been a dentist

in the UK and was delighted to become a builder and gardener – and, after we had installed swimming pools in all the houses, a pool maintenance man. Being a keen musician as well, he soon started a rock band with some French friends and used one of our bedrooms as a rehearsal and recording studio.

"Our friends thought we were mad to give up our secure life in the UK for this French adventure, but we knew we had to do it and ended up living here permanently for 12 years. Our son loved the life

and quickly became completely bilingual and bicultural. It was when we decided to send him back to England to do his A-levels that we started to let La Pinsonnerie as well as the other houses, to pay the school fees!

"We eventually moved back to the UK where my husband returned to part-time dentistry, but I continued to run the houses as holiday lets.

"Last year, we went back to France to begin the process of selling the houses because, after nearly 30 years, it is time for a

younger family to enjoy all they have to offer.

"La Pinsonnerie is now on the market but we'll be very sad to see it go as it was our home for such a long time."

La Pinsonnerie (ID 201618 at frenchconnections.co.uk) lets for up to £3,000 a week and is now on the market for £400,000. ■

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