

The site of Le Manoir de St-Antoine has experienced a colourful and dramatic history, once being the location for a fortress used for monitoring marauding 'companies' during the Hundred Years' War



Fate lends a hand

The thwarting of Frances and Robin Rimmer's plans for a B&B in Kent prompted a chain of events that led to a magical life in southern France, as Faith Warn discovers

The stories of how people come to buy a property in France are many – and they often involve decisions made from heart ruling head or through a series of coincidences that feel almost fated.

A twist of fate, a disappointment and a discovery 12 years ago led to Frances and Robin Rimmer becoming owners of Le Manoir de St-Antoine in the Tarn-et-Garonne department of Midi-Pyrénées.

"I had wanted to buy a B&B in Tunbridge Wells," smiles Frances, "but we were gazumped. The sale fell through and Robin decided to go off to France to see whether we could run a *chambres d'hôtes* there or find a wreck to do up and let out as gîtes. He'd recently retired as a civil engineer and I was still working."

So Robin took the trip alone, ostensibly just to do some research, but events took a different turn when he saw and fell in love with a Quercy stone farmhouse.

"Suddenly one day he called me from Tarn-et-Garonne to say that he'd seen the perfect property," Frances recalls. "He wanted to buy it and if I didn't like it then we could always sell later! Well, I know my husband's determination once he makes up his mind, so I went along with it. A few months later, as we rounded the bend in the road, I had my first view of the house. I gasped – was all that really ours?"

Le Manoir de St-Antoine comprises a substantial stone farmhouse with vaults and a *pigeonnier* tower, a garage and large barn, all set in grounds of 24 acres with magnificent

country views. It lies on the outskirts of the small village of Bouloc, and it is just 10 minutes' drive from both Lauzerte – a hilltop town belonging to *Les Plus Beaux Villages de France* – and the *bastide* town of Montcuq.

A DRAMATIC PAST

The house is steeped in history. The earliest reference to a building on the site is from 1316, when it was nominated as a *fortresse*, a fortified house where horses could be kept and used for scouting on the many local 'companies'.

A big plus here is the tranquillity. There is no traffic, lots of birds, a lovely outdoor life and numerous opportunities for great walking

These were heavily armed private troops, both French and English, that plundered the whole region during the Hundred Years' War. The locations of the companies were then reported to the Duke of Toulouse. The owner of the *fortresse* was a knight called Rouzet and there are many references to mini battles between the Duke and the companies in the area records.



When Robin fell in love with Le Manoir de St-Antoine on a solo reconnaissance trip across the Channel, Frances trusted his judgement, and they haven't looked back since

In 1650 the property was registered as a farm in the name of Delport. It is believed that all the present buildings existed at that time and the stone vaults, with their curved ceilings, were used not for storing wine but for housing animals over the winter. The Delport family are still prominent in the area although the farm lands have all been divided up. The property ceased to be a working farm just before World War II.

Robin takes up the story: "In 1952 the main house collapsed; then in 1972 a French entrepreneur, a truffle grower, bought the property from the owner, our neighbour Jean-Marie. We believe it was the truffle man who called the property Le Manoir de St-Antoine. The main house was restored and rebuilt to a very high standard by Jean-Marie's brother-in-law, Guy, a master mason and also a neighbour. Hence the marvellous new but traditional roof structure, the remarkably perfect stone work and the precisely fitted hand-cut floor slabs.

"The truffle man sold the property to Mr

The property is surrounded by glorious views – an aspect that the couple made the most of when renovating the property

QUERCY GÎTES **REAL LIFE**



The Rimmers have restored the property, but have always strived to maintain the original character and features of the place

Richie, a university professor, who, in turn, sold it to us. We moved in and set to work renovating and improving. When we converted part of the barn in 2002, Guy was our consultant stone mason. Sadly he died some six years ago.”

In the process of providing further living accommodation, the Rimmers took great care to preserve the distinctive character and charm of the buildings. The walls are a metre thick and all original features – including a wealth of beams and some fine stonework – have been preserved. The windows – some of which are the original arrow holes – are to the side and back of the house, providing spectacular views over the surrounding countryside.

The large infinity pool has also been designed to take advantage of the fine views over the valley. Three acres of gardens and an orchard surround the property and beyond this are adjoining fields and an extensive area of woodland.

The main house has been divided into two accommodation options, the upper part sleeping six and the lower vaults apartment that sleeps four. The barn provides a further three bedrooms and is also built of stone with timber beams. This allows the Rimmers to live on-site and let out the apartments for holidays. “Around 10 years ago we started advertising our holiday lets and have never looked back since. Generally our bookings start in May and then we are virtually full for 12 to 14 weeks of the season. We have



Be our guest

What is Le Manoir like for a holiday? **Laura Shadwell** and her family report on their experience of staying in the Vaults apartment

"Before we had even arrived at Le Manoir de St-Antoine, we were struck by the beautiful scenery; sunflower fields as far as the eye could see with Quercy stone properties dotted in lush green countryside.

"We stayed in the Vaults, the lower ground level of the main house. This provided a traditional, rustic base and a cool, welcome retreat from the blazing weather. The swimming pool, at raised level, afforded views of the surrounding area and gave the children endless hours of fun. Although we had our own private space for eating outdoors, the well-maintained garden was shared with the owners, but this certainly was not a problem.

"There is no shortage of activities and places of interest within a 10 to 30-minute drive, from the local village of Lauzerte, a medieval *bastide* perched above the valleys and hills, to the large town of Cahors with the Pont Valentré bestriding the River Lot. One day we travelled further afield to St-Cirq-Lapopie, a medieval hilltop village with possibly the prettiest views in France.

"Robin and Frances were marvellous hosts and nothing was too much trouble. Our kids warmed to them both instantly and Frances became their 'grandmother' figure for the two weeks!"



The Shadwell children enjoyed their visit to France



You could spend a lifetime relaxing in the scenic surroundings of the infinity pool

made the place child-friendly and as a result we attract a lot of families."

GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

Frances and Robin enjoy hosting visitors and have settled well into French life. They feel that local people appreciate them living full-time at the property and Frances has continued to teach English as a foreign language to adults. Bouloc is small but some British and Dutch people live there and at nearby Montaigu-de-Quercy is an international club, which has language classes as well as lots of other activities.

"A big plus here is the tranquillity," says Frances. "No traffic, lots of birds, a lovely outdoor life and great opportunities for walking. We belong to a few country walk clubs.

"There are nice places and good restaurants for an evening out, and sometimes we take a weekend away to Andorra, the mountains, the Mediterranean or the Atlantic coast. Our nearest airport is Bergerac, which is a pretty drive across country, so access to and from the UK is easy."

After 10 years of successful letting, the Rimmers have reluctantly decided that the

time has come to retire and downsize, so they have put their beloved house on the market – but they definitely plan to stay in the area and would even consider keeping the barn as their home and selling off the rest of the property and land. Alternatively, they would be happy to rent the barn from a new owner.

"There is still so much potential for the Manoir," observes Frances. "The accommodation could be updated again and the barn has a further third unfinished bedroom, with planning permission granted to convert the remainder of the building. It would be a good place for themed holidays providing activities or classes, a greater emphasis on accessibility for disabled people and the development of

Three acres of gardens surround the property, and the infinity pool has been designed to take advantage of the views across the valley

long winter lets.

"I'm sure a new owner would feel the same love that we have felt for this house and add a new phase to its long history." ■

Le Manoir de St-Antoine is on the market for £430,000 with French Connections (ID 158735)
Tel: 01580 819303
www.frenchconnections.co.uk