

The French countryside is full of fascinating historic buildings that have played a key role in rural life. Some lie empty and even neglected, but many have been bought by owners relocating to France and lovingly restored as holiday lets. The properties featured here are comfortable houses but each has had a specific and very different use in the past.

Both combine distinctive – even quirky – architecture with a sense of traditions of the past and great charm for holidaymakers. Each has a fascinating story attached to it and the owners have used vision and courage to create a new episode in the life of the property.

Anyone thinking of buying a property of historic and architectural note might assume that it would be subject to strict planning and preservation laws. In fact, surprisingly few properties are given attention by the Fondation du Patrimoine, which is responsible for the protection and restoration of properties of historic or architectural interest in rural areas.

The Fondation was only set up 10 years ago so is still to some extent establishing its role and is only interested in properties visible to the passing public. Owners of properties under its protection can apply for tax relief or grants for restoration, although this can be subject to quite a lot of bureaucratic formality. Check with the department of architecture or culture within your local *préfecture*.

In general, the procedure for buying an unusual or historic building is the same as for any other property. The *mairie* is a good starting point for information about changes and regulations. Owners report that the response is often positive as the local community appreciates the fact that the building will be restored to life – but planning regulations must, of course, be adhered to. You may also have to work with the local *Architecte des Bâtiments*.

When creating a holiday let, it is in an owner's interest to retain and enhance as much as possible of the building's original features and charm while offering the facilities that modern holidaymakers expect. Guests will also appreciate the opportunity to enjoy the outdoor space, setting and location to the full.

Visitors love a good story about the home that will be theirs during their time in France, so if you have any information, old photographs and documents relating to the property's history, then do keep them in a form that visitors can view if they are interested, such as in an album or framed on the wall.

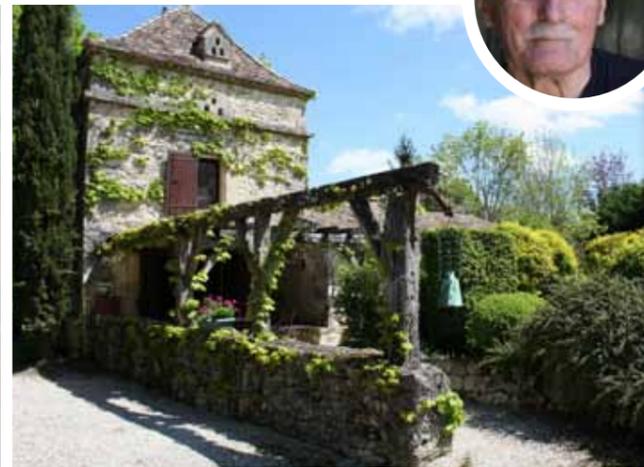
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Pigeonnier in Périgord

HISTORY in the making

The relationship between unique period features and user-friendly modern facilities is never more important than when setting up a holiday let, as **Donna Sloane** discovers



In 1989, Jerry Shively and his wife, originally from New England and Brooklyn respectively, were living in England and decided to retire to France and take on the restoration of a traditional rural property.

Le Tondu, a small estate near the quiet Dordogne hamlet of Naussannes, was certainly that.

"The elderly couple who lived here were self-sufficient peasant farmers leading a lifestyle that had virtually disappeared even then," remembers Jerry. "They wore wooden shoes, there was no toilet either indoors or out and animals were everywhere, from a herd of 20 cows to small creatures in cages. The *pigeonnier* was full of chickens."

The Shiveleys, who had taken a course in architectural restoration in Vermont specifically for the project, recruited local craftsmen and set about restoring the *pigeonnier* first, preserving as much as possible of the integrity of the building. The process was unhurried as timber from the barn was incorporated into the building and garden and the old roof tiles were carefully retained and recycled.

Now the *pigeonnier* is a beautifully restored stone Périgourdine cottage with its own garden – all with immense charm and character, featuring a bedroom in the tower and outdoor seating under the eaves. This year it is being offered as an unusual holiday let, as is the three-bedroom farmhouse on the estate.

Le Tondu Pigeonnier is ID 165962 at frenchconnections.co.uk

Timber from the barn was incorporated into the building and garden and old roof tiles were carefully retained and recycled





Watermill in *Maine-et-Loire*

Six years ago, when Carolyn and Peter Johnson saw Le Vieux Moulin for the first time, the property had been derelict for a decade, but they fell in love with its superbly romantic and tranquil location on a small island between the mill stream and the River Thouet. With panoramic views over the surrounding countryside, regular sightings of kingfishers, herons, deer and other wildlife, and no other properties nearby, the mill simply enchanted them.

“The old mill house was rebuilt in 1846,” explains Carolyn. “We’ve traced it back to Napoleonic times but we know there has been a mill here since the 13th century and excavations on site have found the ruins of an original mill race which could even be Roman.”

The mill house, with its distinctive stonework and shutters, is now the family home and they have created a gîte in the more modern extension, which was rebuilt on the original footprint in the 1950s after a fire destroyed the original mill building and mill wheel. “This was a restaurant and space for dances. Couples would get married at the *mairie* and have their reception here.”

Now, after major renovation work, it offers guests an enormous lounge with conservatory and French doors to a balcony, along with modern kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. Guests love the views and tranquillity, and most business is from repeat bookings.

“When renovating, we encountered few conservation regulations,” remembers Carolyn. “No planning was needed because changes were within the footprint of the house and there were no restrictions on exterior finishes. When we created the fishing platform beside the river, though, we did have to seek permission from the water authority for Maine-et-Loire.” ■

Le Vieux Moulin is ID 163881 at frenchconnections.co.uk

