

ST LAURENT DE CUVES, NORMANDY THE RENOVATION & CONVERSION OF A FARM HOUSE



After driving down from the port of Deippe to Villedieu les Poeles in Manche, we arrived at the railway station on a wet Saturday afternoon, to meet our agent Jeremy, an English man who had lived in France for the past 12 years, and was subsequently to become our friend.

We were taken on a tour of the south west Normandy a fragmented, landscape called the “bocage” a

name which relates to the proliferation of steep banked hedges consisting of granite cleared from fields generations ago and now home to oak, beech and hazel.

These picturesque high hedge rows were to give the allies severe difficulties after D Day as they forced the American tanks, when traversing the high banked hedge rows, to expose their under-belly to the notorious “panzerfaust” rockets.

The plan with Jeremy, was to view some 10 properties in different states of condition. The sites were a mixture of old detached dwellings or vast granite farm houses stuck out in the middle of wet green fields, with only doe eyed cows for company.

After much driving and tramping in wet landscape, we arrived at the last property which we immediately identified as our favourite choice.

THE HOUSE PURCHASE - NOTAIRE & LEGAL DOCUMENTS

The property consisted of one large and one small granite farm building, with two other small barns. After an excited nights sleep in a local hotel, we telephoned Jeremy to say we wanted to put in an offer.

We met Jeremy in a little café, and he explained over omelette and frites, the legal process and the paper work required to be completed, for the processing the French bank mortgage, the 10% deposit and most important of all the time scales.

We returned to the UK, where we immediately planned a return trip with friends, to make a thorough survey of the larger house and get to know the local area.

HISTORY AND BUILDING CONDITION

We informed by Jeremy, that the house was at least 200 years old, and from some evidence of German ammunition boxes found in the barn and chalk graffiti inside the house, the last occupants were German soldiers during 1944.

The building was granite construction; the walls were up to 1m thick with oak floors and beamed roof support. The floor plan was the traditional 1/3rd living and 2/3rd barn on two levels.



The so called living space consisted of an oak plank floor, glass-less windows and a huge 8ft wide open granite fire place, with small sooty niches for storage and the original iron cooking pot ratchet bar.

Apart from some ripped old lace curtains, there was no indication of any luxuries such as water, light or even a cupboard. We all stood

staring at the bare room, envisaging the poverty and hardship of 6 or 7 generations of peasant farmers, through marriages, births and deaths.

THE RETURN TRIP AND SURVEY

The first trip with friends was during January 1990 and was very cold. The process of taking detailed dimensions amongst straw, mud and owl droppings was uncomfortable but exciting. The granite walls of varied thickness and the massive oak beams of varied girth, demanded respect as to their structural support and location.

It is very easy to draw a new window opening from the comfort of your office; it is altogether another experience to stand looking at the same granite wall wondering how you propose to insert new lintels into 1 metre thick flank wall.

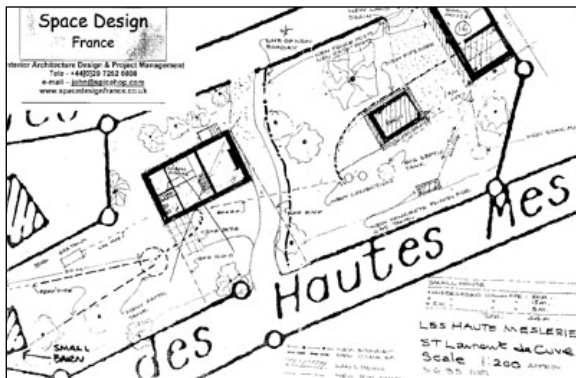
When buying older property, one of the phenomenons is “looking through rose tinted glasses” and the image retained in your minds eye, of how the rustic building appears and the dream of the converted building to come. But it needed 3-4 trips to strip the petals from my eyes, before I noticed an external bulge in one of the walls.

Standing there looking up at the offending projection a rising fear of realisation grew in my mind of a potential problem. I grabbed a ladder and climbed up to inspect the jutting stones, to see if there was any moss covering. Moss would confirm that it had happened some time ago, and had not just recently.

Fortunately this was the case, and so I had time to resolve the problem and research the traditional technique of inserting a solid steel tie rod completely through the centre of the house to be secured with decorative brace support to the exterior.

DESIGNING A NEW “LIFE STYLE”

Fortunately with my back ground in interior design and fitting out, I understood the need for an accurate survey supported by plenty of photographs. The 2/3rd barn section of the



dwelling occupied a deceiving amount of space, therefore from the mud floor to the roof ridge, there was sufficient height to insert three new floor levels, with a second floor above the original living room.

From the original single room of 300 sq ft, I was able to create an extra 2,400 sq ft of living space, which would accommodate 6 bed rooms, shower/WC, bath/WC, open plan kitchen diner, and lounge and entrance hall.

When planning a second home, you have an opportunity to re-think your life style, as to how you want to use a dwelling. The day to day summer use of minimal internal cooking and time spent outside, is in contrast to the winter, when your main preoccupation is keeping a dry supply of logs for the stove and hunting down those ghost drafts which were not apparent in the glory days of July.

PLANNING THE FLOOR SPACE

The ground floor which originally housed the animals, sundry farm equipment and cider barrels, had sufficient space to plan for two small and one large bedroom, shower and large entrance hall. The ground floor entrance hall was viewed from above by a balcony from the first floor, to provide borrowing light and to monitor how much mud the children were importing with their muddy boots.

I located the kitchen/ dining area on the first floor to allow cooking and dining to be a combined social experience and impress our guests with the aromas of the culinary delights to come.

The lounge was located in the original living space to take advantage of the open fire place fitted with a very efficient imported American wood burning stove.

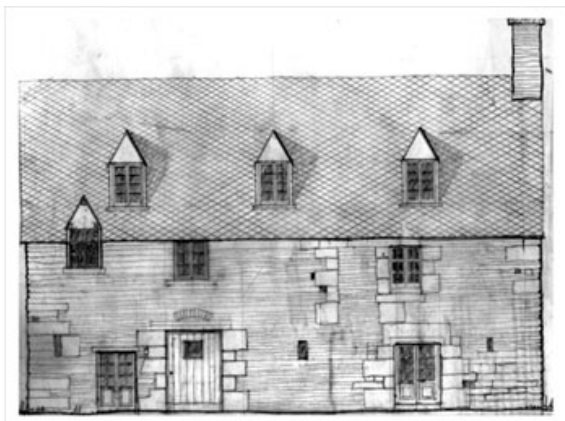


The new second floor was partitioned off to provide two small and one large bedroom, with the exposed oak frame roof timbers to gaze up at from under the duvet.

The top floor required six new traditional dormer windows to provide natural light with the added bonus of fantastic views across the adjacent valleys.

THE SELECTION OF INTERIOR FINISHES

My eventual approach to interior finishes was “traditional”, as I had initially researched and acquired nearly every French Interior reference book that I could lay my hands on. I must still have one of the largest collections in the northern hemisphere. But drooling over wonderfully elegant and chic Parisian apartments or cool Mediterranean villas is not the correct content relevant to a Normandy granite fortress.



So I came down to earth, and opened my eyes to the fact, that all that was required was the use of local materials and simplicity. Therefore the choice became oak for boarded floors, windows, staircases and chestnut for window sills and general joinery.

I retained the natural granite stone walls and the new partitions were decorated in off-white emulsion paint. The whole concept was to offset the rough granite

walls, with matt painted partition walls hung with a mixture of colourful rugs and cotton print curtains and drapes.

The bathrooms and kitchen were a great opportunity to use imported ceramic tiles from Spain, in colours that were not thought contemporary, but were great for evoking a pre-war French atmosphere.

DRAFTING PLANS & SPECIFICATIONS

I completed a full set of drawings and details, consisting of elevations, plans and sections with French annotation and with the assistance of the French agent and friend Jeremy, we arranged site meetings with pre-selected local artisans to discuss and agree our requirements.

These initial meetings generated a series of trips across the channel, to guarantee that we had the information in place to encompass the complete conversion process, from new dormer windows to tiling and new services connections.

Each appointment with the locals, were very friendly affairs, be it conducted in my then limited French, and the contractors even less English, comprised of lots of arm waving, pointing and scrutinising of my detail drawings.

But our persistence prevailed and we were successful in imparting the requirements, with the invaluable contribution of Jeremy, whose command of French far outstripped the local vocabulary.

STARTING THE CONVERSION

Waiting to receive the quotations from the local contractors is a learning curve of patients and an understanding. The French artisans are not in a hurry to complete tiresome paper work, but the quality of workman ship is generally excellent. With regards to a date to start the works, you will require an ordination and a hefty amount of scepticism.

The joinery contractor from Avranche quoted for the replacement of all the windows and doors in oak, to match the original details and mouldings. He was very enthusiastic about the project, and repeated “boucoup, boucoup”, as he stared at the extent of building work.

He was also delighted that we were renovating with traditional materials and features, even down to replicating the original oak panelled entrance door with a separate wicket panel door, very useful for ventilation in the summer.

THE PROGRAMME

As we had completed the legal transaction in February 1990, we were determined to try and finish the interior ready to have a family Christmas.

To kick off the project, we bought a cheap caravan in the UK and towed it down to Normandy during one week end. The caravan would be the accommodation for our first subcontractors, two English builders. I briefed them as to the scope of work, programme and agreed terms of payment; I also set up accounts with local builders merchants to supply materials.

The easy stage then began, stripping out the rotten timbers and old hay from the barn to build the biggest bon fire since ” D day”, but all the good oak was saved and stacked for fire wood, which was to last 5 years.

Large old oak beams can appear rotten on the outside, but if you try to saw a section, you will soon find a black heart, as hard as iron but a great slow burner for the wood stove

WATER, ELECTRICITY, BANKS AND LOCAL RATES

To get a project off the ground, a French bank account is critical. Before any work can start, you need to plan ahead to make sure that the contracts for new utilities are set up , to allow all the services to be pre-installed.

Opening a new bank account is similar to obtaining approval for new building permission from the local Marie, it is important to meet the manager and introduce yourself and discuss your plans.



Jeremy was able to smooth the path with the local manager of Credit Agricole, and when I made the great mistake of issuing a cheque with out sufficient funds in the account, Jeremy again was my saviour and explained to the manager that this silly Englishmen had not intended to cause problems.

In France a cheque is accepted with out a bank card and because of this inviolate status, any fraudulent use was a serious offence and could of lead the cheque issuer to be put on a national black list.

Lesson learnt, I made sure that in the future the banks transferred funds in good time, although at the time some UK banks did not always carry out the transactions and were not aware of banking terms such as “swift” international branch codes.

Generally opening an accounts for services such as telephone, propane gas etc, I found the response to be quick and surprisingly up to date, considering the house was located in a very rural district. The so called French bureaucracy, use the latest computer systems in some cases far more advanced than in the UK.

CONSTRUCTION STAGE - INTERNAL STRUCTURE

For the stripping out of the interior I produced schedules specific to what was to be removed and what original features were to be retained. The new floor levels were designed to incorporate the existing massive oak beams, which with a degree of pre-planning and “on site” ingenuity, can be retained as major features to enhance the rustic nature of the building. The summer of 1990 was extremely hot and during my frequent site visits to France from the UK to assist and supervise, the end of the day was celebrated with a quick “douche” under the outside tap followed by an excellent and cheap 35F three course dinner, in a local town, come back the franc!

The specialist work such as inserting six new Luocanes [dormer windows] into the existing slate roof, was carried out by a local Joinery company with the very English name of James pronounced “jamb”. They disappeared for two hour lunches, but the job was carried out quickly and at a competitive price.

THE INTERIOR FIT-OUT

We worked through the very hot July and August of 1990, completing the new suspended timber joisted floors and connecting the floor levels with new oak staircase and the second floor level with a re-used pine staircase that I had recovered from an old Victorian house in the UK.



The new interior space began to evolve, as plaster board partitions and plaster skimmed walls progressed.

When the new oak double glazed windows arrived and were fitted, the building was transformed into a house with its own character.

While I plumbed in many metres of copper pipe for the heating, bathrooms and kitchen, the electrical carcass

cables were installed in accessible wall and roof voids, to make sure that the all the services could be altered or extended in the future.

The highlight of the summer was the arrival of the wood burning stoves and the Reyburn cooker from the Wood Stove Shop near Canterbury in Kent. Due to the dead weight of the cast iron appliances, Andrew Hemsley the proprietor constructed a temporary ramp up the front steps, to manoeuvre the heavy parts onto the first floor. This was carried out by Andrew, who luckily had invaluable experience in these tricky jobs. Later that year Andrew returned to supervise the installation of a new flue lining into the granite chimney, which required purpose designed apparatus to lower sections of the flue lining down into the interior of the original stack, from the top of the chimney some 40ft high above ground level.

FINAL COST SUMMARY FOR 1990

Item	Description of work & Expense	£
Builders Work	Strip-out/ External ground works drainage , Fosse Septique Construction of new timber floor levels/ Insulation Rendering & plastering/ Partition & doors	11,900.00
Electrical	Electrical :Supply & install new power cable distribution, brass accessories, lighting.	2,500.00
Plumbing	Plumbing -New sanitary fittings & brassware	4,500.00
Joinery	Solid oak staircase with winder. 6 no dormer windows, double glazing & linings. Solid oak windows & external doors – Supply & fit :-	8,900.00
Decoration & tiling	Floor & wall tiling to two bathrooms, kitchen and total ground floor.[75 sq m]	4,800.00
Legal fee's & service connections, Travel & Fuel.	Utilities – Service connections for metered water, electricity a propane. Supervision of site for 12 months,& set up costs.	23,650.00
Furniture & Fittings	Fittings – Wood burning stove, Reyburn cooker, including flue linings and insulation & all white goods. Furniture - Beds, dining table, chairs sofa's, kitchen cupboards, floor coverings etc	7,700.00
	Grand total expenditure	£63,950.00

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