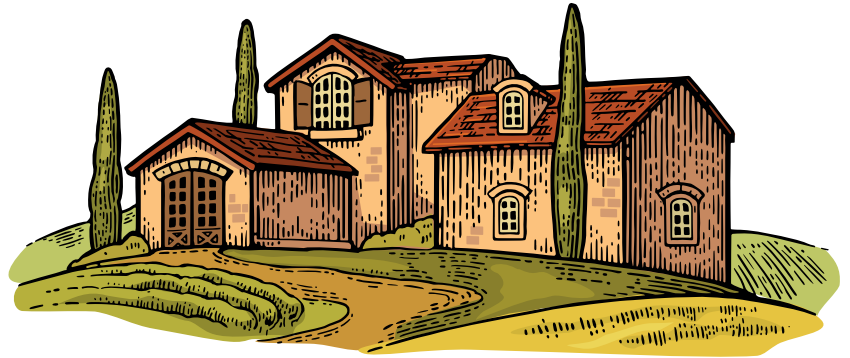


A GRAND DESIGN



RESTORING A NORMANDY FARMHOUSE TOOK GRIT AND PERSISTENCE, BUT IS A GREAT SOURCE OF PRIDE, SAYS **JOANNA BONNETT**

In 2011, my husband and I purchased a Normandy farmhouse we had found via the internet. We had searched for a long time to locate the perfect property, a centuries-old stone building set in 2.6 hectares of farmland. Hunting it down and then navigating the French legal system at arm's length were to prove just the first hurdles on our 'Grand Designs' journey, however.

In February 2012, about six months after completing the purchase, we swapped the 40-degree heat of Australia for a numbingly cold Normandy winter with temperatures around minus-six. We knew the property had nothing inside and expected to find it in poor repair; the previous occupant, an old lady, had lived in a successively smaller set of rooms in her later years. Undaunted, however, and having pre-ordered beds, heaters, a kettle and other essentials, we embarked on a three-week reconnaissance mission to assess our great project – with three children in tow.

Our daughters were fascinated by their encounter with the ice and snow, and set about making an ice rink

in front of the building, which, once it started to melt, revealed a burst water main.

This was not the only mishap. A broken toilet flooded the inside of the property and the heaters we'd ordered proved particularly effective at attracting in many field mice.

To say the experience left us chastened would be a polite understatement.

At this point, it dawned on us that not only had we taken on the renovation of a 200-year-old house, but we were

about to embark on that project in a very different culture and in a language we didn't yet speak. We discovered local bakeries that didn't bake bread on certain days and supermarkets that would shut for lunch without giving you a grace period to speed through the checkout. Then there were the cryptic warnings to stay away from the drivers of small cars. The reason, it turned out, was that in rural France, this mode of transport is the favoured one for disqualified drivers.

So we returned home for some serious planning and to gather our wits. Our renovation project would take considerable resources – personal as well

as financial – and we needed to regroup.

In 2014, we put all our belongings in storage and moved to France. That year, we took the entire building back to its skeleton, including removing the internal walls. At that point our command of French was insufficient for us to work with local tradesmen, and the English-speaking builders we came across had indifferent skill levels. And so we did it ourselves. With our 14-year-old daughter translating instruction booklets and interpreting for us in DIY stores, we learned building, plumbing, plastering and all manner of trades through trial and error. Where once we had barely been able to bang in nails to hang pictures, we found it in ourselves to fit bathrooms, replace windows and lay carpets. Apart from the electrics, the rejuvenated farmhouse is all our own work.

Our French adventure hasn't stopped with the building work. Our property is part farmland and we have developed a deep friendship with the neighbouring farmer, who rears cattle on our land and shares an orchard with us. The cows provide milk for cheese, and apples from our orchard are made into Calvados and liqueurs. We are turning our hands to cider making next

and have plans to convert the adjoining barn and enlarge the property.

The entire experience has been very hard work, but immensely satisfying. Growing to understand the French rural culture, language and developing relationships with local people has enriched our quality of life. Above all, L'Auberdière gives us and our family – we've since had a fourth child – an idyllic country retreat and the possibility of pursuing 'the good life'.



All about Normandy

- Normandy has five UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and 80 sites dedicated to D-Day and the Battle of Normandy.
- Around three-quarters of Normandy's territory is agricultural land, much of it given over to dairy farming and apple orchards. Farming provides employment to nearly 10% of the population. Cider, Calvados, cheese and cream from the region are much prized.
- There are an estimated 4.3 million expats living in France.

Joanna Bonnett is group treasurer of **PageGroup**