

A decade ago we would never have dreamed we would be living in France, having developed Les Basses Beaulinges, a derelict cider barn in a cow field in Manche, Normandy. In 2002, my husband Mark and his friend Clive decided to invest jointly in a French property, purely as an investment to sell on at a later date, maybe running it as a rental holiday home for a while. The total costs, including *notaire's* fees, were €12,000. It doesn't sound much now but, even split 50/50, it was then.

Due to pressures of work, not a lot happened for two or three years; then unfortunately Clive had an industrial accident which put him out of action for another couple of years.

In 2007 fed up with the economic situation in the UK, Mark decided – without any discussion with me! – to sell his business and go to France to complete the renovation.

With Mark commuting between France and the UK, I noticed the changes in him each time he came home; he was less stressed, more laidback and generally a happier and nicer person, who was always impatient to get back to France. We needed to review our lives.

A year later and after several commuting

office. They provide an English-speaking banking service to people living in the UK, France or Ireland with an interest in France.

I applied, heard nothing for a while, and then out of the blue, while we were travelling around searching for a property of our own to live in, I got called in for an interview. I started about two weeks later. So, after a 2,500km reccie to find out where we wanted to live, we realised we needed to look closer to our renovated barn.

Amazingly, we ended up on our own doorstep as we bought an extension of the field attached to the barn's garden! There was a derelict two-room stone manger and a separate stone oven with a tree growing out of it, plus an apple orchard. We negotiated a deal with the farmer we bought the barn from – at a higher price, of course – and realised that this was another big project and lots of hard work. At least financial help was at hand with my new job, even if it was a 220km drive each day!

I've worked all my life and travelled abroad and throughout the UK, but driving this distance daily was hard at times. In 2013, after living for six months in a caravan without

NORMAN conquest

Building a new life in France hasn't always been easy for **Lynda Stenton**, but almost 10 years on, she's very happy she made the move

trips between the two countries, 'the Barn' was complete. Meanwhile, my working life in travel and tourism was changing; the company where I had worked for 13 years was moving north (we lived in Essex). I decided to take redundancy and within three days of leaving work, I moved to France. This was October 2008 – the week the world turned upside down! We put our UK house on the market and took it off again all within the same week because of the financial crash.

Tough times

It was a tough move. Mark had made a life for himself in France, had French friends and could actually communicate with them. I was jealous as I had none of that and, initially, I took a back seat which wasn't healthy.

I was juggling renting our UK house and looking for work. I dabbled with some private employment through old UK contacts but after six months decided to look locally. I put out 100 CVs and was prepared to cook, clean or wait on tables. I then met a friend of a friend (English) who worked for one of the largest banks in France, Crédit Agricole, in their Caen head

electricity and water (just a water mains in the garden), we moved into the half-converted manger (one bedroom, kitchen and bathroom extension). It was compact! On the plus side, the Barn was doing well with regular reservations and great reviews.

In July 2015 Mark finished our house – well, almost: two bedrooms, a large lounge diner that can accommodate 30 French and British friends sitting down for the New Year, a kitchen, large terrace, gardens and a shed.

After five years of renting out the barn, in early 2016, Mark, still not content to take it easy, decided to ship and construct a log cabin from Lithuania, as a second option for holiday guests. In addition to this, he ran a B&B service in the barn in between the main holiday season to help with costs. The work was finished in August, just 30 minutes before our first paying guests arrived. Phew!

Then in February 2017, after talking to some guests-turned-friends, Mark decided to create a 'mini resort', building a swimming pool and decking area. The pressure was back on. As June arrived, he was under a tight deadline to finish in time but as usual did it by the skin of



Mark shipped a cabin from Lithuania as a second option for holiday guests



The manger being converted and extended



inside 'The Cabin'



Lynda and Mark's own home started out as an old animal's manger

Top tips... IF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT A GÎTE BUSINESS

- Consider your surrounding area (within a two-hour drive) so that your guests have lots to do.
- Check out the competition.
- Build your own website as well as using holiday agents, and create an e-business card with *business.google.com*. This way you can be seen by people searching the area they want to holiday in.
- Support your local bars and restaurants. It's amazing who you can make friends with who may be able to help you.
- Think about the layout of your gîte business. You need to maintain your own private space (unless you have a B&B) – this indicates that the guests will need theirs too.

Top tips... IF YOU ARE THINKING OF A PERMANENT MOVE

- Before you decide to buy, explore the area (you'll be surprised by the number of people who don't), the amenities, neighbours, and what's in the fields (if you're in the countryside) – you may end up with animal odours you're not used to!
- If you fall in love with your dream home with the sun shining, revisit in winter, it can be very different.
- Get your finances in order; I'm biased obviously but I'd recommend opening an account with Britline even before you move so you can be sure of support in your own language.
- If you need to work, have an idea of what you're going to do – do you need to be able to speak French? There are English-speaking services available (Britline, of course, but also EDF and Orange), perhaps they're in the area you're moving to.
- How far do you need to travel for work? There is a great car-sharing (*co-voiturage*) structure in France (see *blablacar.fr*).
- Introduce yourself to your neighbours; generally they're very friendly and like to get to know and help you, especially if you try to speak their language. Don't worry if your French is not perfect; usually the French will make allowances and will be pleased that you have tried.



The final addition was a lovely pool and decking area



Mark and Lynda

“After living for six months in a caravan without electricity and water, we moved into our half-converted animal manger”



Mark initially bought the barn as an investment to do up and sell on



The kitchen in the converted barn



'The Barn' has proved a successful holiday rental

his teeth. The guests/friends re-booked and loved it, even in the rain. They, their friends and parents are now regular visitors.

Highs and lows

Of course, there have been good and bad times. The highlights include:

- Being accepted and becoming part of our local community, sharing celebrations with French and British friends and neighbours
 - Meeting wonderful people of all nationalities through the holiday gîte rentals and B&B, some of whom are now friends for life
 - Getting a job and a headstart on French culture, as many of my Britline colleagues had already 'done it and got the T-shirt'
 - Having the opportunity to rebuild our life; although we're still working hard, we enjoy the best of both worlds, socialising and having more quality time in general.
- And the pitfalls?
- The initial move was unplanned, which made it both exciting and very scary
 - The language – you just need to go for it, give it a try and the locals will think better of you
 - The stress and pressure of Mark's projects and deadlines, although they were all in our interest as we were building a better future.

What now?

I have made Mark promise there will be no more projects, just catching up with jobs that need completing. In early 2017 the UK housing market picked up and four weeks before the Brexit vote, we finally sold our UK property. It was a huge turning point. There was no going back now, we were completely committed to our life in France.

Last summer, a lovely family arrived with a new toy, a drone, so we now have a video of Les Basses Beaulinges, set to music! You can see it on our Facebook page and website. Although it shows all the brilliant work Mark has done, it shows it 'warts and all', as we didn't have time to create the perfect setting before they started enthusiastically filming.

I am taking a year's sabbatical from Britline for 2018; we'll have the chance to travel, even to the other side of the world to see friends in Australia, then maybe onto New Zealand, Japan and the States.

We're planning to work closely with farming neighbours and good friends who have a new free-range pork business; families can visit the animals and purchase fantastic local produce. We're also introducing trout fishing just five minutes away. It really is fun for all the family and Mark is always on hand to assist with the fishing and preparation for the BBQ. And, of course, we'll continue to enjoy meeting and greeting new and interesting guests from all over the world. ■

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