



The country life

Chris and Jacky Holton have beautifully restored their Dordogne farmhouse to bring it back to life with elegant interiors and a striking blend of old and new

WORDS: ANNA MCKITTRICK IMAGES: LARRY MONGEY

Although it might have taken Chris and Jacky Holton two years to find their dream French property it's clear that it was worth the wait. Four years down the line and the Holtons now run a successful gîte business at their stunning rural *manoir* set in over a hundred acres of organic pasture and woodland in the beautiful Dordogne countryside. From the outset Chris and Jacky knew they wanted a rural property with farmland as back in the UK they lived in an idyllic farmhouse and kept a smallholding in Sedbergh in the heart of the Cumbrian countryside. Like many couples with young children looking to relocate, Chris and Jacky decided their two daughters Alice and Eliza (then four and two) were at the right age for the family to make the move which coincided with their desire for a new challenge. Having spent many childhood holidays in Dordogne Jacky knew the area well and after several jaunts to south-west France and viewing many properties which didn't meet their criteria Chris and Jacky finally came across a 17th-century *manoir* on the outskirts of the picturesque village of Cause-de-Clerans. Jacky recalls the moment they first laid eyes on the property: "I can remember coming here with

the estate agent. It's got two entrances and she brought us in the back way and I remember saying to Chris 'we'll know in 15 seconds whether we like it or not' and as soon as we went round the corner and saw the front of the property, we knew it was the one."

Even though many of the period

The Holtons weren't fazed by the challenge of a renovation project and relished the prospect of creating a home that was exactly to their taste



Opposite page: The vast *manoir* kitchen. **Above:** The Holtons' smallholding. **Below:** Chris with Alice and Eliza and their sheepdog Misty

pieces such as the fireplaces had been removed in the 1970s, the Holtons immediately saw the house's potential as a family home and business opportunity with the various outbuildings and farmland that they had so wished for with their move to France.

With two UK property renovations already under their belt and Chris' experience as a structural engineer the Holtons weren't fazed by the challenge of a renovation project and, in fact, they relished the prospect of creating a home for their family that was exactly to their taste.

Chris and Jacky did the bulk of the renovation work themselves, occasionally enlisting the help of local artisans including their neighbour who is an artisan plumber/blacksmith, and helped hand-forge the banisters on the stairs which Chris had cast from concrete with local stone for the treads. "Chris is a hands-on structural engineer with over 20 years' experience specialising in historic and ancient buildings so he enjoyed the challenge," says Jacky.

It certainly wasn't just a lick of paint that was needed to bring the rambling barns and farmworker's cottage back to their former glory, but a complete structural overhaul. The stairs were replaced, period fireplaces installed, oak beams



hoisted in and walls knocked down and rebuilt. Jacky says they were delighted to encounter some of the original architecture during the renovation process. "The kitchen, once part of the hunting tower but left as a dank and dark ruin had been used for the storage of preserves and hams, and housed the only very dilapidated toilet in the whole house," she explains. On removing the old plaster we discovered a medieval arrow slot window so the French windows which were due to go there were re-positioned onto an adjacent wall with approval from the mayor."

All in all it took about two years for the Holtons to renovate the gîte and *manoir* and it was certainly a labour of love. Chris and Jacky say you have to be

"Combining the old with the new and trying to seamlessly put them together is what I enjoy doing. I love using all the natural materials from leather to linen"

flexible and be prepared to have dust all around you when you take on a project of this level but it's worth it in the end because you have a property that is entirely yours and no one else's.

While Chris focused on the structural side of the renovation project it was Jacky who designed the interiors, with the restoration process allowing her time to reflect



Clockwise from left: Chris and Jacky fell for the impressive entrance to the *manoir*; cool down in the solar-heated pool

on the look she wanted to create and get to know the properties, such as where the sun comes in and which rooms are light and dark in order to achieve the best layout. "It certainly does help living in a place because your ideas change over a period of time but I think my main aim was to have somewhere that was elegant, calm and French" says Jacky, who describes the overall style as French with an English twist. She also wanted to incorporate the original features of the property when creating the look but equally wanted to have a family home

with modern conveniences. "Combining the contemporary with the traditional, the old with the new and trying to seamlessly put all that together is what I enjoy doing. I love using natural materials, from leather to linen, and we've got beautiful wooden floors, stonework and tiles." The colour palette throughout the *manoir* and the gîte evokes a calm mood with muted hues of grey, cream and pale green offering the perfect partnership to the honey-coloured natural stone.

Chris and Jacky are fans of salvage yards and *brocantes*, and



have collected an eclectic mix of vintage and antique furniture and decorative pieces both in France and the UK. "We love giving things a new lease of life," Jacky enthuses. "Handmade tactile pieces of furniture with a history enhance our enjoyment of using them." Take their kitchen table. They had to alter one of the barns and remove some of the first floor joists in order to fit in their 30-year-old tractor, which they brought over to France with them, and the spare joists became the beautiful centrepiece to their kitchen courtesy of a creative friend.

The spacious kitchen has a cosy feel to it and rather than just being somewhere to cook, it lends itself as a space to relax and spend time

with the family. As with the rest of the house Jacky brought together modern elements and traditional pieces in the kitchen: "The contemporary concrete worktops made by Chris, stainless steel appliances and Philippe Starck lighting sitting in perfect harmony with an old butcher block, pine cupboards and chairs covered with Herdwick sheepskins in the winter – these connect us to our life and family in Cumbria."

The Holtons' aim from the beginning was to be as eco-friendly as possible, which is something they have worked hard to achieve. Back in Cumbria their smallholding was run organically, so when they moved to France it was natural that the farm they

Clockwise from top: A mix of linen, wood and stone creates a welcoming feel to the living room; Jacky loves country life; hens roam freely on the organic farm

took on would also have as little impact on the environment as possible, both on the land and in running the house and business. The gîte and house are heated by woodburner boilers using wood coppiced from their own forests on the estate, the pool is heated with solar panels and underground water storage tanks supply water to the organic vegetable garden bursting with fresh produce including potatoes, lettuce, carrots, leeks and aubergines.

Le Rigal is a working farm with beef cattle reared on the organic pastures which are cut for hay during May and June. The Holtons also keep and rear rare breed pigs, which they use to make their own sausages and hams with the help of their French neighbours, plus a menagerie of other animals including a flock of hens, cats, rabbits, ponies and their beloved sheepdog Misty.

The gîte, which is the former farm manager's stone cottage, sleeps six to eight and can be rented out throughout the year while the *manoir*, the Holtons' family home, is only open to guests from May to October. Renting out the *manoir* wasn't part of their initial plans but a couple of summers ago when an American



family enquired about staying in the gîte and there was no space they decided to let out their home and use the time to take their family holiday. Interest in the *manoir* increased and now it has become a regular summer fixture. When guests are at the *manoir* the family stay in their other property, a small cottage they are renovating in Cause, less than a five-minute walk from Le Rigal. Jacky says that although it might sound like a bizarre system it actually works really well and the family enjoy experiencing village life for part of the year.

The Holtons have embraced their new life and settled into life in rural France which Jacky says didn't come as a big shock as they were used to living in the countryside back in Cumbria. "We'd come from a country community so we knew how it worked and that getting to know

your neighbours is key. Although you're isolated to some extent your neighbours help you out and you help them out. So many people who have the idea in their head that they want to live in the country aren't prepared to muck in and do the work, and when you have a farm it's all or nothing really. It can be very tiring."

Jacky also credits their integration into the local community with having young children and getting involved in school activities. When Chris and Jacky first moved to Cause they were the only English couple with children at the local school so they had to socialise with French families which was helpful for all of the family, especially Alice and Eliza who are completely bilingual after four years.

Jacky says they try to give as much back to the community and for the past two summers they



Clockwise from top: The property is surrounded by picturesque countryside; relax by the eco-friendly wood burning stove

have hosted charity events for the school at Le Rigal including a piano bar fundraiser, with their impressive grand piano the focal point. And with its beautiful surroundings and stunning interiors, it's no wonder the Holtons are more than happy to share Le Rigal with friends, locals and guests alike. www.rigal-gites-dordogne.com