

FRENCH PROPERTY NEWS

INSIDE:
Expert and
real life
advice

The biggest and best UK guide to French property | Issue 260 | October 2012 £3.99

How to afford a château

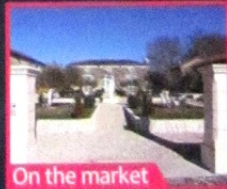
*Combine business
with pleasure*

**Fusion of
old and new**
*Stunning homes
in Midi-Pyrénées*

**"Could this be
the one we were
looking for?"**
Living in Vendée

Long arm of the Loire

**Must-read
business
special!**



www.frenchpropertynews.com



+ Buying guides + Expert advice + Location features + Legal & financial tips

Kings of the castles

Todd Mauer meets Harry and Jacqueline Atterton who have spent their retirement breathing new life into ancient and derelict historic châteaux across France

For most British people, the notion of retiring in France conjures up images of *la vie en rose* – gently whiling away the golden years on a sun-dappled, wisteria-draped terrace; glass of sparkling wine in hand. But while many work hard to make that particular dream come true, there are others who choose a very different kind of retirement, opting to forego the relaxation and the chilled glass of Vouvray for the hard-earned satisfaction of preserving France’s rich architectural heritage, one building at a time.

Meet the Attertons, 21st-century castle defenders. Yorkshireman Harry Atterton and his wife Jacqueline from New Caledonia have spent the last 25 years of their retirement restoring – and, in some cases, saving from almost certain ruin – historic French castles.

Although Harry grew up in England, he spent the majority of his working life in Canada, where he met Jacqueline. But when offered early retirement from a high-powered job in the aviation industry aged 51, Harry leapt at the chance to do something different. “We decided to get out of the rat race and do something fulfilling,” he says. “We’ve been working on restoration projects ever since. To a degree we’ve impoverished ourselves in doing so, but what we’ve had is an absolutely enriching experience. We live frugally and happily.”

Currently residing in Domfront in Lower Normandy, the Attertons are fixing up what they say is their final restoration project: the one remaining building of a castle built in the 16th century on the site of a medieval fortress of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine; a fortress which was destroyed on the orders of Henry IV of France during the Wars of

Religion. Like most of their other restoration projects, the castles the Attertons have restored are full of fascinating history.

Their first major restoration was the 13th/15th-century Château de Bouesse in the Berry area of central France. The castle was once owned by Louis de Culant, a companion-in-arms of Joan of Arc who fought at her side during the lifting of the siege of Orléans and at the Battle of Patay (the French revenge for the Battle of Agincourt). Joan herself is believed to have visited the castle in 1430 during her stay in Berry shortly before her capture.

“Starting in 1986, we checked out 100 castles,” says Jacqueline. “We visited 30 through 1987/1988, which involved five trips from Canada to France. We negotiated on five of them, and finally bought Bouesse in late summer 1988. It was in a terrible state, as it hadn’t been lived in since 1933. There were holes in the roof bigger than a truck, and rain used to cascade down three flights of stairs to the entry hall. The courtyard was a jungle. We decided to answer its desperate cry to be saved.”

FAMOUS VISITOR

Thanks to the Attertons’ efforts, the castle was rescued from an uncertain future and is now a lovely and luxurious three-star hotel and restaurant attracting some surprising guests, both real and... well, ethereal. “We lived on-site while the work was being done,” says Jacqueline, “moving from finished room to finished room as work progressed, one step ahead of the ghosts.”

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” says Harry, “but we had one room in the castle in which scores of people had the same experience. We always played dumb every time, knowing exactly what our



HARRY’S TOP TIPS

- If you’re going to devote a lot of time, energy and money on either a cottage or a castle, make sure you’re head over heels in love with it from day one.
- Never do anything without a detailed quote.
- Start at the top – which means the roof – and work down so that what you do inside is protected.
- Plan the work from start to finish, even if you don’t intend doing everything at once, or you’ll end up knocking holes in what you’ve already done.
- Get used to doing your own dirty work. Why pay expensive plumbers and electricians to dig trenches when their skills come at a premium?

guests were going to say. And local people used to gather in the courtyard once a month during the full moon to see the corpses come out of the ground and dance on the lawn. It sounds crazy, but for them it was very real.”

Spectral visitations are one thing, but the most surprising visitor to Bouesse was, at least at the time, very much of the living. It was 1996, and Harry and Jacqueline had been warned by a Parisian estate agent that a VIP client was interested in purchasing the castle, but first wished to visit it incognito. On the appointed day, in pulled an enormous limousine, and out

popped the most famous pop-singer on the planet.

“Mr Big was dressed in a dark suit, wearing a 1940s fedora, one white glove, dark glasses, holding a white handkerchief over his face and a Mickey Mouse umbrella,” recounts Harry. “Our waitress, who was looking out the door at this scene, said ‘Ahh, Michael’ and fainted. We had to drag her feet first into the kitchen before he reached the front door, and I had to greet him while pretending not to know who he was.

“He turned out to be a very interesting man. We toured the castle together, and he asked quite erudite, intelligent questions



The magnificent 92ft donjon of Montbazon in the Loire Valley was built between 991 and 996, and painstakingly restored by Jacqueline and Harry

they then took on what was their most ambitious project: the imposing donjon (castle keep) of Montbazon, south of Tours in the Loire Valley.

At first glance, the 92-foot-high castle keep of Montbazon may appear to be just another of many medieval fortresses dotted throughout the French countryside. But, as the Attertons appreciated, Montbazon is no ordinary pile of old stones, in spite of its fragile and endangered state when they bought it. Built some time between 991 and 996 by Fulk Nerra III, the Count of Anjou who laid the foundations for the Angevin Empire, the square fortification is believed to be the oldest castle still intact in all of France. As with Bouesse, when the Attertons arrived, Montbazon was in desperate need of a benefactor, in danger of collapse and being swallowed up by encroaching vegetation.

“The sadness back then was that it seemed little was being done to save France’s historical patrimony,” says Jacqueline, explaining why they undertook such a large project. “French patrimony is so vast, and consequently so much is lost. The state can’t look after everything, so it depends on visitors.”

The Attertons were struck by the history of the castle. Before Fulk Nerra, military fortifications in France and Britain were typically wooden motte-and-bailey type structures. The formidable stone keeps like Montbazon that Fulk built were a game-changing revolution in military architecture which would travel far beyond his bailiwick; influencing, in particular, his blood-relation and contemporary William the Conqueror. “Fulk’s keeps may be considered grandfathers of the British castle,” Harry says, and anyone familiar with William the Conqueror’s Rochester Castle or White Tower in London will recognise the lineage.

HARD LABOUR

Although some people looking to restore old properties might balk at taking on an ancient structure in pressing need of repair, Harry offers this reassuring advice: “In many ways, the older a structure is, the safer it is to buy. Large medieval structures were often

built for defence, and so have thick stone walls. The techniques used to build more residential stately homes may be more modern, but they’re not as solid and are more likely to have structural defects. Also, the bigger a property it is, the cheaper it is to buy. Smaller manor houses can be more expensive because people can get their minds around how to fix them up.”

Restoring Montbazon took several years of labour, much of it done by the Attertons themselves, which involved reinforcing crumbling foundations, cutting back the vegetation encircling the fortress and transporting tons of rock by hand.

“At one stage, we had a team of five masons rebuilding walls at Montbazon and it was our job to keep them supplied with stone,” explains Harry. “So every time a building was demolished within a 25-mile radius and they were looking to dump the rubble, we had it delivered to our parking lot outside the castle. One time, we received 47 25-ton truck-loads when an old convent was knocked down nearby, which we then had to sort by hand. Just for the fun of it, we made a serious calculation that Jacqueline alone, over the course of several months, had wheeled 1,000 tons of stone an average of 100 metres. Just as well she’s an ex-fitness teacher!”

Privately owned throughout its documented history, Harry and Jacqueline finally opened Montbazon to visitors for the first time in 2003. In 2008, once the fortress had been firmly established as a fascinating medieval alternative to the Renaissance châteaux that typify the Loire Valley, the Attertons sold up and headed to Domfront in Normandy for what they say is their final restoration project.

The house they’re currently restoring is the one remaining building of Château de Godras, a 16th-century castle which was later restored in the 18th century, and which will now be given a 21st-century lease of life thanks to the Attertons’ loving ministrations. They’ve also been busy in the local community, where Harry’s been the initiator and driving force behind a project to rejuvenate empty shop-fronts in Domfront. Employing the *trompe-l’oeil* technique, the idea is to cover empty shop windows with bespoke ‘virtual shop-windows’ depicting lively scenes of shops, bakeries, butchers,

florists etc. Harry convinced the town to support the scheme – the first time it’s been tried in France – in the hope that it will encourage people to set up shop.

So far, the response from the locals has been overwhelmingly positive and, in a remarkably short time, the Attertons have become valued members of their adopted community. There have even been suggestions by the locals that Harry run for mayor.

According to Harry, who harbours no political ambitions, the affection is mutual. “Having restored these places and got to know the different regions of France, the most amazing surprise to us has been the change of culture here in Lower Normandy,” he says. “We’re in the middle of the enormous Second World War battle area, which I think changed the mentality of the Lower Normans. They’re very humble, appreciative and friendly people because they saw these millions of men from all over the world fight for their freedom, and it’s marked them generationally. They have a totally different attitude towards foreigners in this part of France.

“Every region has its character, but essentially the main thread is that they’re very French. Here you truly feel that there’s a Norman identity. And of course you’ve got the historical and cultural link to England, and also a topographical link. It’s amazing. Sometimes you feel you’re in England.”

ENDURING LOVE

For Harry then, his choice to spend his remaining years in Normandy represents a return of sorts to the England of his youth – albeit with a French (or, as he would say, Norman) twist. For Jacqueline, who was born in French-speaking New Caledonia, the last 20-odd years of her retirement have meant a return to the ‘mother country’, with which she’s also fallen in love in spite of an enduring love of England.

Reflecting on their quarter-century of active retirement restoring historic properties, Jacqueline sums up the experience: “We decided we wanted to do something useful with our retirement, and leave a legacy other than a wasted life. On the downside, we’ve experienced occasional anguish, poverty, broken dreams and health. On the plus side, we’ve felt a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, and have learned true values.” ■



- Don’t forget you’ve crossed a culture gap. ‘Presently’ and ‘tomorrow’ might translate into long delays if you don’t stay on top of the job.
- Be fair but firm with workers. You’re not there to be liked, but respected. The occasional tantrum helps. The French call it ‘showing character’!

about the construction and history of the place. I got the impression he wasn’t some dumb pop star. After an hour, he said, ‘Why are you selling?’ I answered, ‘I’m about to launch my career as a rock star.’ He looked at me very strangely. I think he thought I was taking the mickey out of him.”

After finally selling Bouesse (alas, not to Michael Jackson), the Attertons restored a second medieval castle in the Berry, Château de Mazières – now a gorgeous hotel and setting for wedding receptions – and a group of neglected farm buildings.

By this point experienced restorers of venerable properties,