

property



**LIVING FACT**  
Landes is, after Gironde,  
the second largest  
department of the  
Metropolitan French  
territory

# A passion for the past



**Louise Taylor** visits a seventeenth-century chateau that has been subtly restored to create a comfortable family home steeped in faded glory

**M**arc Allum and Lisa Lloyd may be antiques collectors and experts, but they have their feet firmly planted in the twenty-first century. Indeed, it is largely thanks to the modern marvels of IT and the Internet that they can indulge their passion for the past.

Until recently, the couple were London-based co-directors of a successful auction house, and Marc was – and still is – an expert for the BBC's *Antiques Roadshow*. Today, they both work remotely from rural France, where Lisa is an antiques consultant and Marc has just

completed a book on collectors' items, travelling back to the UK to film roadshows as needed.

In 2003, the couple had an impressive antiques collection and a Sussex home that was carefully furnished with their finds, but they were disillusioned by commuting to London and the pressures of work, and wanted to change their hectic lifestyle; a move to France was mooted. Regular holidays with friends living in the Béarn region had already convinced Marc and Lisa that southwest France was where they wanted to be, and

in 2004, they bought an 11-bedroom, seventeenth-century château with nine acres of land, situated in Landes department, near Pau. Their new home had large, elegant salons, two towers, a secret room formerly used to hide in from Protestant persecutors, deer-filled woodland and a view of the Pyrenees. Its price tag of £285,000 reflected the amount of work needed to modernise it. 'We bought a French château for the same price as a two-bed flat in Finchley,' smiles Lisa.

Untouched since the 1920s, Château Coÿe needed a great deal of tender, loving care, but the couple had restored five properties previously, so undaunted, they set about breathing life back into their first French project. Work started at the end of 2004: Marc commuted back and forth, labouring and overseeing the renovation as his UK commitments allowed, while Lisa kept the plates spinning in Sussex, working, looking after their six-year-old daughter Tallulah, putting their UK home on the market and planning their move across the Channel. After six months of hard slog, Château Coÿe was habitable (though far from finished), and in spring 2005, Marc, Lisa, Tallulah and Pip the dog took up residence.

Restoring this stately home to its former glory was a labour of love, with the emphasis firmly on labour; the previous owner had sold up after only

two years, possibly overwhelmed by the amount of work needed to turn such a huge house into a home. First to be addressed were the essentials. A central heating system, new wiring and plumbing were installed (no small undertaking when you consider the size of the property), and six new bathrooms were built (curiously, there was only one when they bought their eleven-bed room home).

### CRUMBLING PLASTER

The ancient sewage system (an antique in its own right) had to be updated to conform to new regulations – a complicated job that involved huge trenches being dug around the house and across the front drive. Not a pretty sight, but as Lisa says, 'at least it happened at the right time. The garden was being dug up anyway so we could put in a swimming pool, and there were huge mounds of mud and earth everywhere. Sorting out the septic tank just added to the general chaos.' It also added to their ever-increasing expenditure: installing a new septic tank and filtration bed to separate rainwater from sewage set Marc and Lisa back almost £7,000.

They used local artisans to repair essential services ('they did a great job at a reasonable price,' enthuses Marc) and found a local Brit with solid building experience who oversaw the project in their absence; fortunately, the *Bâtiments de*

## Top tips for renovating a château

- Visit regularly to check on progress and keep your builder sweet
- Hire a project manager to overview the renovation in your absence
- Allow extra time for the project – it will always take longer than you imagine
- Factor in a contingency fund – it will always cost more than you planned
- Don't use unqualified labour, or anyone who suggests working 'on the black'
- French craftsmen tend to specialise, so be prepared to hire individual artisans for specific jobs
- Take photos of the project in progress – they can be useful if there are any disputes
- Keep costs to a minimum by sourcing your own materials and furnishings
- Avoid buying materials before you need them – requirements may change as the project progresses
- Hang on to your sense of humour – you'll need it!

**Their new home had large, elegant salons, two towers and a secret room formerly used to hide in from Protestant persecutors**



**Opposite page below:** Marc and Lisa bought Château Coÿe (pictured above) to escape the rat race in the UK. **This page, below:** The house is now a perfect showcase for the large collection of antiques the couple have acquired over their years as collectors



France restrictions on renovations to French properties situated close to listed historical sites were not applicable to Château Coÿe. They tackled much of the DIY themselves, partly to keep costs to a minimum but also because they enjoy the work. Sourcing and installing roll-top baths ('we found some good ones on eBay,' enthuses Lisa), making window lintels and scrubbing the traditional Basque criss-cross wooden floor in the *grand salon* are just some of Marc and Lisa's achievements to date.

Inside, the couple chose – somewhat unusually – to leave parts of the crumbling plaster and torn wall fabric untouched, preferring to keep an entirely authentic, aged look. Their objective was to restore the château so it would work as both a family home and a guesthouse, without losing its faded glory aesthetic, and the result is like



**This page, top left: The *salon* and right Marc, Lisa and Tallulah relax in the great outdoors Bottom, left: Lisa and daughter Tallulah enjoying the pool Bottom, right: The barn has been converted into an artist's studio Opposite: Guests can experience an authentic French setting**



stepping back in time. 'The challenge was to stabilise the original structure and interior without making the place look over-restored,' comments Marc. They used over 400 litres of paint, choosing subtle shades purchased in the UK because (according to Marc) British paint is better quality and less expensive than the French equivalent; they spent £2,500 and saved money on shipping by going direct to the manufacturer.

## GEORGIAN GLASSWARE

Lisa estimates the total amount spent to date to be around £100,000 (rewiring alone cost £17,000, and the swimming

pool added £22,000 to the final bill), but as Marc points out, 'In a property of this age, the job is never done. No sooner have you mended a leaking pipe than you need to tackle a broken lock, or a crumbling stone lintel, or a warped window frame. But that's what owning a character home is all about: dealing with the repairs and maintenance. It's the price you pay for living like this – you have to be practical and have plenty of energy to take on a project of this kind.'

Today, the formerly tired château is a showcase for a vast collection of antiques, curios and objects from around the world, including Samurai armour,

**That's what owning a character home is all about: dealing with the repairs and maintenance. It's the price you pay for living like this**





Neolithic arrow heads, Tang dynasty figures – and Shirley Bassey's make-up case (Lisa has a penchant for the personal possessions of famous people). No less than 12.5 tonnes of furniture were shipped, at a cost of £12,000, using a specialist carrier; Lisa reports that amazingly, nothing was broken in transit – 'well, not as far as I know, but we still have lots of boxes in the attic to unpack, so I may be wrong!'

Their comfortable family home is

both a living museum and a source of income. This year, Marc and Lisa are running painting breaks and antiques courses, with some familiar faces from the *Antiques Roadshow* taking part, and art tuition by former Slade School head Ron Bowen. House guests will attend informal lectures on the world of antiques and get to handle unique, prized items; sleeping in original Napoleonic sleigh beds, reclining on Regency sofas and drinking from Georgian glassware

will be just part of the fun. Meals will be served in the chestnut-panelled dining room, resplendent with its seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century furniture and paintings, so guests can really live the antiques experience in a French setting. 'We want people to come and enjoy what's here,' says Marc. And with pilates and holistic retreats also in the pipeline, this unique, charming home is set to attract Francophiles both ancient and modern for a long time to come. ■

## Time and money: Diary of the build

### April 2004

Marc and Lisa complete on their purchase of £285,000

### October 2004 – March 2005

Major works carried out:

Heating installation – £17,000  
 Rewiring – £17,000  
 Swimming pool – £22,000  
 Filtration/sewage system – £7,000  
 New plumbing, including installation of six bathrooms – £10,000 (excluding fittings)

### April 2005

Marc, Lisa, Tallulah and Pip the Jack Russell move in. Furniture shipped from the UK – £12,000

### May 2005

Interior decoration commences including repainting throughout (£2,500 spent on paint). Reclamation and renovation of gardens commences

### March 2006

Renovation of barn loft to create artist's studio

### April 2006

First guests arrive at Château Coÿe!

### Current / future projects:

Renovation of the *pigeonnier* to create a two-bedroom cottage. Creation of a formal garden for the courtyard

## Fact File

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## What's your story?

Let *Living France* know if you collect French antiques and we could be running your story in an issue coming soon.

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