



ESCAPE to the COUNTRY

A move to Poitou-Charentes sparked a change in career for one couple who have happily settled into French village life, as Anna McKittrick discovers

Will and Liz Weeks took a leap of faith when they moved from Salisbury to France in 1998, but 13 years on the couple are still delighted that they took the life-changing hop across the Channel.

“We have four children between us and they had all flown the nest. I was working as a sister in intensive care at Salisbury hospital and Will was an engineer and we were like ships in the night. So we decided to do something different. We were only in our mid-40s at that stage and quite bravely, or stupidly, cut out of our

careers and came to set up a business over here and we haven't looked back,” remembers Liz.

Prior to moving, the couple spent many holidays in France and were

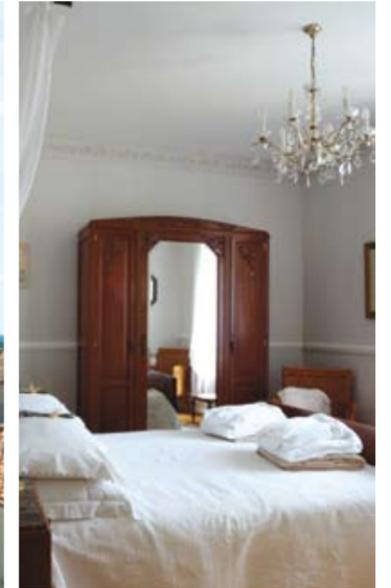
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particularly charmed by the relaxed lifestyle and pleasant weather in Poitou-Charentes. Once Will and Liz had set their minds on a region they began narrowing down where exactly

This page, above: it's easy to see why Will and Liz fell for beautiful Manoir Souhait

they wanted to settle. “Coming from England I don't think you really grasp how big France is. Originally we had an area where we planned to house-hunt but we soon realised it was far too vast. What focused us was going to a property exhibition in London because suddenly you have people asking you what you want from your move to France and we found that very helpful,” says Liz.

As the couple were planning to set up a *chambres d'hôtes* business they knew that the property had to be in the right kind of location to attract holidaymakers, but it also had to



appeal to the Weekses as they would be making a permanent move. Will and Liz decided the south of the region, with its excellent transport links, proximity to the sea and moderate climate, was the perfect fit for their burgeoning business and on their second property hunting trip they found Manoir Souhait, a beautiful manor house in the department of Charente-Maritime.

“We looked at lots of rambling châteaux and gîte complexes and this house wasn't even shown to us as a potential. As soon as we approached the property we knew we had fallen in love with it. I'm normally very vocal when looking around houses but during this viewing I was quiet. After half an hour Will asked me what was wrong and I said that I wanted it so badly that I didn't dare

This page, clockwise from top left: the new pool area; elegant interiors; village life; Liz and Will are happy they made the move over to France

say that I loved it for fear that it would be unsuccessful,” reminisces Liz. Thankfully they were successful and went on to buy the manoir, which they still call home today.

Located in the village of Gourvillette, the manor house, formerly known as Le Logis de Merveilleux du Vignaux, was owned by the prosperous Merveilleux family who originated from Switzerland. The agricultural estate was constructed in 1630 with many outbuildings for housing animals, storing the harvest and making wine. Over the centuries the land was gradually sold off and many of the buildings were altered, including the ▶

original château which was demolished and rebuilt using the same stone but in a style typical of the 19th century.

Today the date 1888 still sits proudly above the main entrance of the manor house, offering a gentle reminder of its past. The property changed hands to the Pommereau family about 100 years ago and when Will and Liz purchased the house in 1998 they bought it off an English builder who took on the property in the early 1990s when the last surviving member of the Pommereau family died.

The Weekses carried on the renovation process that the previous owner had started but it was in a very habitable state, enabling them to move in straightaway and make alterations once they had settled in. Will and Liz wanted to preserve the original style and history of the property and employed local artisans to carry out the work they couldn't do themselves, including the stonework, electrics and plumbing. "We are very fortunate that within our small village we have an excellent

builder. He's the third generation of a family of builders so his father and grandfather have all worked on the property," says Liz.

With the help of Belgian interior designer and antiques dealer Stefaan Lagrou, the couple have created a warm and restful ambience inside the manoir. A mutual friend introduced Liz and Will to Stefaan, who had a clear vision of how the interiors of Souhait could develop, which mirrored their own thoughts.

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"We sought a welcoming atmosphere allowing our guests to feel comfortable and relaxed and we wanted to avoid it being impersonal. Stefaan and his lovely mother Annie arrived with a van full of furnishings and chandeliers and set to work over a few days. Together I think we have achieved the right balance and it's somewhere we are very happy to call home as well as a special place for

This page, below: Will and Liz (centre) enjoy sampling the local restaurants
Facing page: the couple love sharing their little corner of France with both guests and their family and friends

guests to enjoy," enthuses Liz. Stefaan has become a firm friend of the Weekses and Liz says he often brings something along when he visits that he feels is "just right" for Manoir Souhait.

As keen antique hunters, Will and Liz have been able to carry on their hobby since moving to France and they enjoy going to local *brocantes* and antique fairs to hunt for treasures for the property. "You never quite know what is in store when you visit the village *brocantes*. It was an exciting time for a shopaholic such as myself," says Liz.

The manor was already being run as a holiday let, with additional gîte accommodation in a converted cottage, so when Will and Liz bought the property they also took on the previous owner's business concept. For the first two years they ran the business as it was but after a while Liz says she realised that she wanted to develop it into a *chambres d'hôtes*. "It was very successful as a holiday let because it's a lovely home and could easily accommodate three families staying as a group. But the ▶





longer I lived in the property the more I realised that letting it go as a holiday home was too hard. I wanted my home back,” says Liz. The solution was to transform Manoir Souhait into a *chambres d’hôtes* and they haven’t looked back.

The manoir now has two two-bedroom family suites and a double room. Liz says it’s the perfect size in that while it’s small, it’s not too intimate and guests still have plenty of their own space, including a reading room and a salon. The guest accommodation is separate to Will and Liz’s private living area, which she says is very important.

There are additional unconverted outbuildings and at one point they considered transforming one of them into a five-bedroom gîte and even had planning permission, but after much thought they decided it wasn’t the right decision.

“One evening we were having a drink on our front terrace and looked at where we were planning to convert this property and suddenly we had a light bulb moment and realised it wasn’t what we wanted. We felt that there would have been too many people here and it would have changed the ambience of Souhait. So we pulled out and converted the pool



Manoir Souhait also offers tables d’hôtes prepared by Liz, a keen cook who loves discovering the local specialities

area instead which was a much better idea,” remembers Liz.

Aside from doing bed and breakfast Manoir Souhait also offers *tables d’hôtes* prepared by Liz, a keen cook who loves discovering the local gastronomic specialities. Even though there is a lot of work involved in cooking for guests, sometimes four nights in a row, it’s very enjoyable for Liz who has a vast collection of cookery books to inspire her along with visiting restaurants in the region.

While the couple are busy with the business they have still made time to settle into the community which

has just over 100 inhabitants. Liz describes Gourvillette as a working village with year-round residents, both French and English, and a friendly atmosphere.

“The summer is obviously livelier here but there are people around all the time. We have a dog called Farah, who we rescued when she was nine months old, and even walking her through the village can take forever because you stop to chat to someone,” laughs Liz. The Weekses have both got involved in local life – Liz was a councillor for seven years and Will was on the entertainment committee – and in the summer they enjoy going to the twice-monthly village picnic, a convivial affair with everyone bringing and sharing food.

Will and Liz are firmly settled in their corner of France and while they miss their four children and six grandchildren terribly they are within easy reach for them to visit Manoir Souhait as regularly as time allows. As spring approaches the couple are treasuring their remaining downtime before the busy season starts but even when they are rushed off their feet it’s still enjoyable as they are doing something they love, in an area of France that they adore. **LF**
www.manoirsouhait.com

This page, above: enjoying a well-earned coffee break in the gardens of Souhait
Below: classic car enthusiasts often stay at Manoir Souhait during the annual Circuit des Remparts in nearby Angoulême