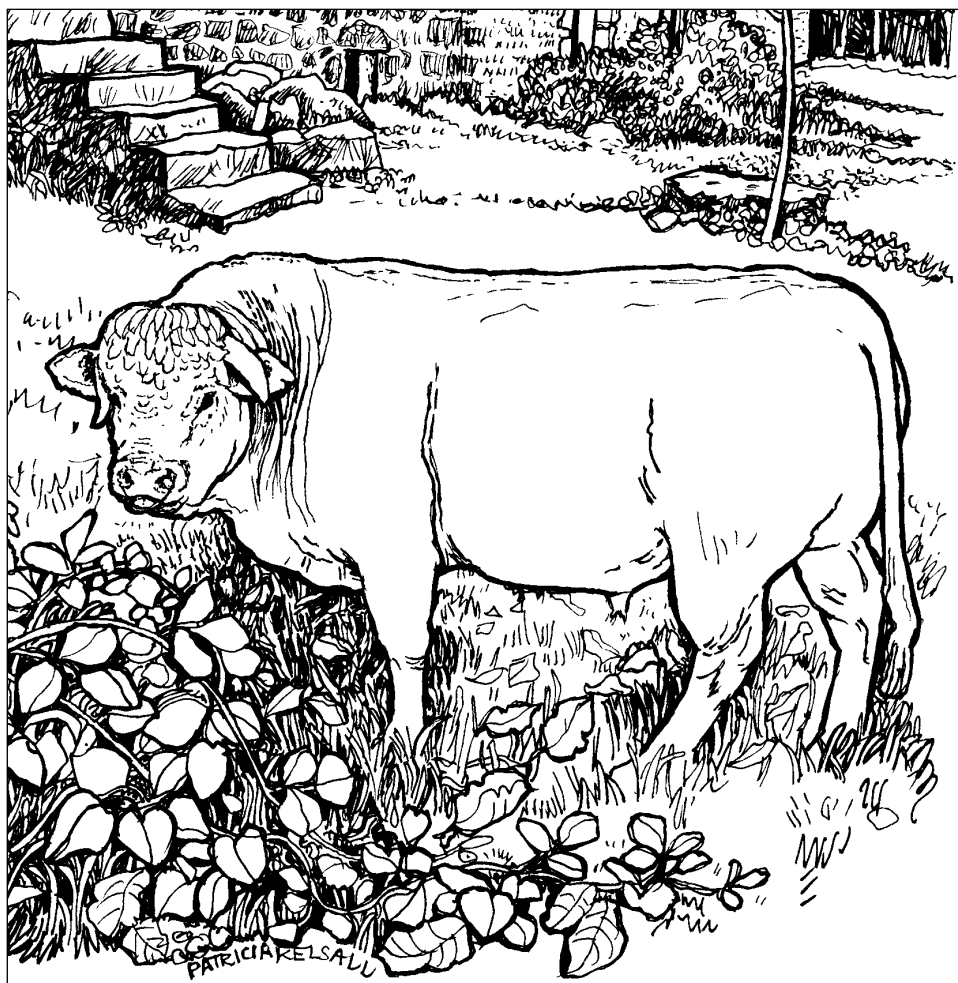


A BULL BY THE BACK DOOR

by Anne Loader



How an English family find their own paradise in rural France

A Bull by the Back Door

by Anne Loader
Illustrated by Patricia Kelsall



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Dedicated with grateful thanks
to **Joan Ward, Léonie Dutheil**
and **Joyce Crust**
who made this book possible

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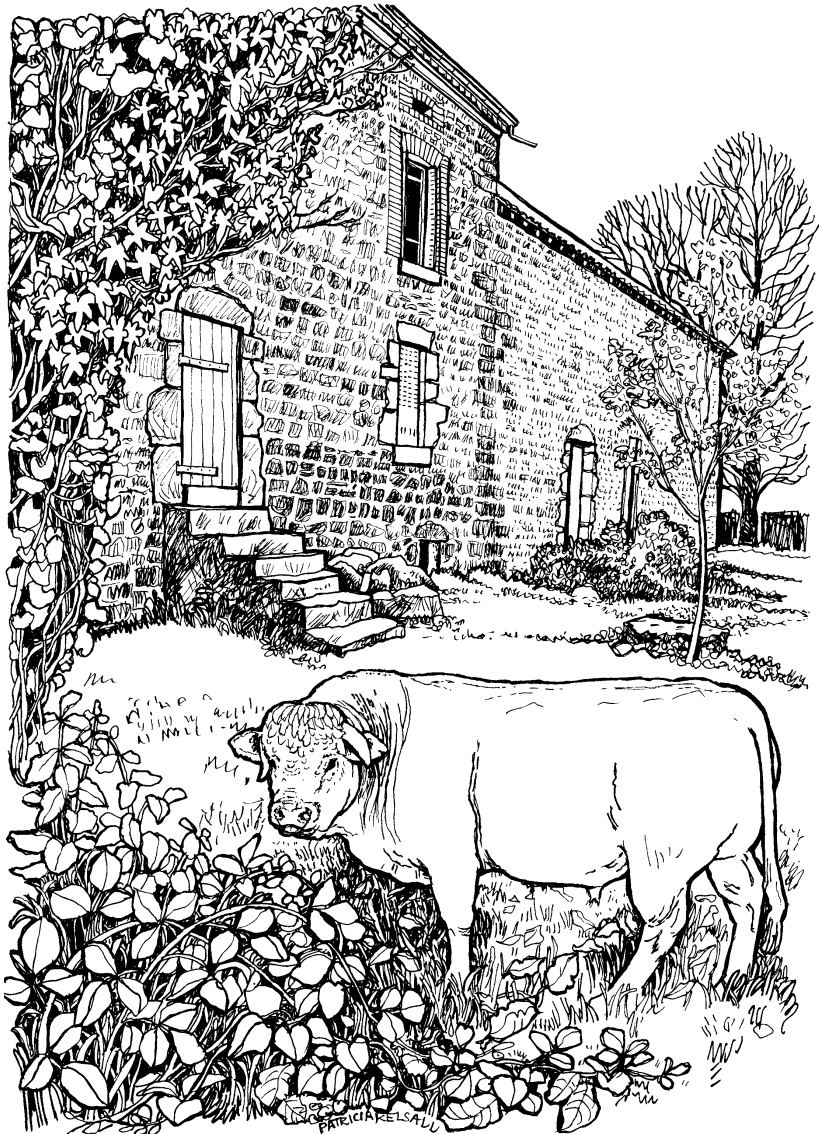
Anne Loader is a writer and publisher. She was born in Lincolnshire in 1948 and trained as a journalist with East Midland Allied Press in Spalding and King's Lynn from 1965-68. In 1969 she married Jack Loader who was doing a PhD in Chemistry at Southampton University. She worked at the *Southern Evening Echo* until they moved to Cheshire in 1970 when he took up his job as a research scientist in the chemical industry. They had two sons and for the next ten years Anne worked from home as a writer and printer. She edited and contributed to *Pregnancy and Parenthood* on behalf of The National Childbirth Trust, which was published by OUP in 1980. The same year she returned to journalism as a feature writer on *Northwich World* and in 1984 she helped to start the *World* local newspaper in Crewe, becoming editor in 1985. It later became the *Crewe and Nantwich Guardian*. She was made redundant as editor in 1995 and in 1996 she set up as a freelance writer and page designer. Shortly afterwards, she started the Léonie Press as an imprint of Anne Loader Publications, specialising in producing books on local history and autobiography.

Patricia Kelsall is a part-time lecturer in Art & Design at Mid-Cheshire College teaching drawing and painting to full-time and part-time students. She has exhibited her work mainly in the North East of England and in Cheshire as well as the Royal Academy in London, the Manchester Academy of Fine Art and at the Annual Salon in Mornant, France. Patricia's illustrations and paintings have appeared in numerous publications including Newcastle 900 by Frank Graham, greetings card designs for Bucentaur Gallery and many limited edition publications including publicity brochures, letterheads, menus and local authority town trail leaflets. Her paintings have been reviewed in *The Observer Magazine* and *The Guardian* newspaper. She loves visiting France and she and her artist-husband Richard have spent many Summer holidays in France where they enjoy walking combined with outdoor sketching and painting.

A Bull by the Back Door

Everything described in this book is true, to the best of my knowledge. However to protect the privacy of our friends in France I have changed their names and the names of the villages mentioned. They were kind to us because they are marvellous people — not because they thought they would be the subjects of a book. We thank them from the bottom of our hearts.

Anne Loader



This time the bull meant business – the herd was staying.

Introduction

The Limousin bull was massive, battle-scarred and very well hung.

One of his horns was twisted. He swaggered across the field bellowing gently, conversationally.

Then he sat down outside the back door and started to chew the cud. Shortly, four of his calves gathered round the remains of the bonfire and sniffed its acrid trails of smoke. The seven cows grazed calmly in a group near the hedge.

They were back.

And settling in.

The first sign had been the clatter of hooves on the road outside. It was an Autumn Sunday evening and we had been resting on the settee in front of a blazing log fire. Out of the window we had seen excited calves leading the way down the hamlet's sloping lane, followed by their mothers — for all the world indulging their children in an escapade. Bringing up the rear was the bull, his flesh rolling with each big stride. He looked like a father who really had something better to do.

The seven calves had spilled through our gateless entrance, trotted across the two-acre field and forced their way out into our neighbour's fallow land through a hole in the hedge. The cows and bull had followed them slowly, enlarging the hole with their bulk.

A few days later, they all came back — the cows through another gap in our sparse and newly-slashed hedge, the bull and the calves up a grassy footpath beside the eastern boundary of the field. Occasionally the bull stopped to rub his great head against trees along the path. We could see the branches bend under the impact of his horns.

A passing car on the road outside the house frightened the calves, who scattered back down the path and entered the

field by jumping over the stone wall near the duck pond.

The bull took no notice. He left the path at its junction with the road and strode slowly towards our entrance, watching his family over the hedge. He came through the gate, supremely confident, a mass of muddy flesh, a healing wound on his shoulder. This time he meant business. They were staying.

We'd watched them from the high granite steps leading up to the back door, then retreated to the safety of the scullery window. The bull was only a few feet away and when I took a photograph he turned to glare towards the sound of the shutter. Then he lay down outside the dining room window and the calves started their bonfire-junkie act over the embers of cleared vegetation.

"No gardening today," said my husband Jack.

How did we find ourselves here, deep in the peaceful *France Profonde*, with a bull, seven cows and seven calves in the back garden and the most wonderful neighbours on earth living just opposite?

It's a long story but first I must say that the house found us. Or at least, Marguerite found us — and she had been dead for nine years.

Chapter One

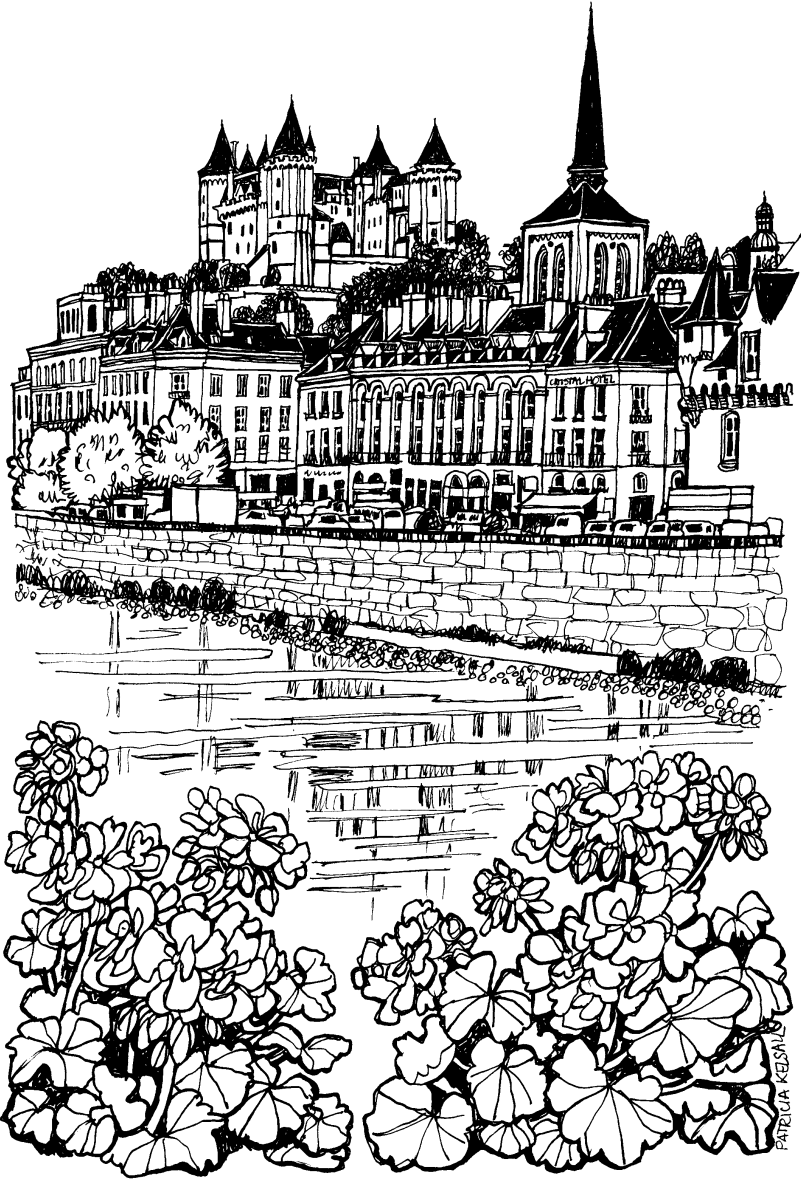
We'd wanted a house in France for 11 years. It had been a dream fostered by a love of the country initially implanted by my mother, who had lived there when she was young. She taught me French words and expressions at the same time as I absorbed English ones: *le tapis, la porte, la fenêtre, les rideaux, s'il vous plaît, merci, la plume de ma tante*, and our family joke — *toute suite and the tooter the sweeter...*

I thought I could speak French until I went to secondary school and discovered she hadn't done verbs.

I learned enough of the language in the formal grammar school way to pass my GCE and promptly forgot most of it when I left school. I became a journalist, married Jack and we had two sons. In the 70s you were not expected to return to work when your children were small, so I stayed at home: writing, designing and printing. Then in 1980 I went back to fulltime journalism. But I never stopped being fascinated by France.

In 1983, as soon as we could afford it, we had our first French holiday. We went with a camping company and stayed in the Loire, the Dordogne and Brittany. All three venues were to have a profound effect on our lives.

We chose Saumur on the Loire because that was where Mother had lived for a year with her best friend, Helen, as the paying guests of a notable local family who were down on their luck. They had lost their château and land because of a swindling estate manager and had moved to an elegant house in the town centre where Madame Chevalier, by now widowed, vented her bitterness on all around. The girls moved in fashionable circles, with tea at the Consulate and flirtations with the famous Cadets from the Cavalry School. The household had a maid who by all accounts never washed, and



Mother could see the four-turreted chateau from her window.

Madame wore the same black clothes every day topped by a choker which hid the wrinkles in her neck and made her feel fashionable again. Mother despised her then but, 70 years later, feels sorry for her — a *grande dame* whose society friends laughed at her predicament, forced to rely on the income from insubordinate English teenagers.

Helen married the son of the family. She was the daughter of an English headmaster and not at all the moneyed catch that Madame had relied upon to restore the family fortunes. Madame was not kind to her and Mother backed her friend stoutly, returning to France to help when her babies were born and when she needed support. She worried all through the War that Helen would be betrayed to the Germans, but she never was. Then she died suddenly of a brain haemorrhage in the early 1950s and her husband died from grief a year later.

The children, who had adored my mother, still think of her as their “second mother” and look upon me and Jack as their English cousins.

It was important for me to find my mother’s old haunts in Saumur. My bedroom walls had been covered with 1920s *passee partout* pictures of Cadets on rearing chargers and I had spent the Sunday mornings of my childhood going through her photograph albums so the Consul’s garden was as familiar as my own.

The Chevalier house which stood beside the beautiful bridge over the Loire had been destroyed in the war, when the Cavalry School Cadets famously held out against the advancing German army. The family had moved away long before then. The site was still intact and the modern shop which replaced the house was faithful to its former 19th century proportions. I could look across the river at it and imagine my mother there.

But the magnificent four-turreted chateau which Mother

could see from her bedroom window remained, now restored and open to the public. The Cavalry School still dominated the town, and the army horses could be seen in neat rows looking out of their stables or on their way to the indoor riding school. Now, however, the Cavalry had some reinforcements: it seemed there were as many tanks at Saumur as horses.

I found the spot on the banks of the river where Mother used to watch the washerwomen and I revelled in the splendid pedestrianisation of the town centre.

And we found the Chevalier family château a few kilometres away, built into the side of the hill, where Marguerite of Anjou and Queen of England had died in 1482.

I had a tremendous feeling of oneness with my mother at Saumur and formed a deep attachment to the place. Initially, I wanted to live there myself if we ever had the means.

From Saumur we went to a camp-site near Sarlat, set on the banks of the River Vezère. It was here that our two sons, Alex and Chris (then aged 12 and 13) had their first experience in a canoe. They loved it so much that afterwards they joined a newly-formed canoe club at home and we spent the next five years totally engrossed, supporting their passion for slalom canoeing. It kept us together as a family at a time when many children grow away from their parents and cemented us as the loving unit we are now that they are grown up.

After ten days in the Dordogne we went to a site at the seaside town of Pornic in Southern Brittany. The object was to be near our eldest "French cousin" Annette, who lived in Nantes with her six children.

She showed us the coast and the glamorous resort of La Baule. She drove us at top speed around the city of Nantes, ignoring red traffic lights as she concentrated on speaking English again. (That journey will be etched on our minds for the frantic shouts of "*C'est rouge, Maman!*" from a horrified daughter in the back of the car, each time we came to a

controlled road junction and had to swerve to avoid oncoming vehicles). We saw the walled town of Guérande and drove round the salt pans of the *marais*.

But best of all Annette took us home to stay at her flat and to visit her prefabricated “house in the country” which she and her late husband had built from nothing. We learned how to open folding metal shutters, to drink breakfast chocolate from a bowl and to eat croissants. Our “relations” from three generations converged to give us an overwhelming welcome. We became part of French family life for an unforgettable two days. Now we knew two vital things: we loved France and we didn’t want to be tourists.

We deliberately tried a different region every year, to see which we liked best. We had fantasies about buying a house, which we thought would never be fulfilled — but it was fun to pretend to be prospective househunters. As we drove hundreds of miles across the country, we idly looked for our ideal style of architecture and our favourite scenery. We still loved Saumur but found the flat countryside around it rather uninspiring. We went to Brittany, the Jura, the Tarn, the Ardèche, the Cote d’Azur, the Pyrénées — almost everywhere except the North East and the Languedoc.

After our first taste of the country, we returned to France every year and built up friendships through various municipal twinning arrangements. Soon we had close friends in the village of Mornant near Lyon, and the towns of Mâcon and Dole. We fostered the links with our “French family” and dropped into the habit of dividing our annual fortnight’s holiday by spending a week with friends and a week in a rented house somewhere.

In 1992 we chose the Limousin almost by a process of elimination: we hadn’t tried the Centre of France and we liked the photograph of the neat stone house in the brochure. It was

love at first sight. We stayed about 20 kilometres South of Limoges in a tiny hamlet with a wonderful panoramic view. It was reached down a leafy lane with small fields on each side, dotted with cows, calves and sheep. There was a forest a few hundred metres away. The old couple who were responsible for the house in the owner's absence were kind and welcoming.

The house itself, though beautifully renovated externally, was the least luxurious we'd hired. We had access to only half of it and were faced with numerous locked doors. We wondered what was behind them — arms caches for the Limousin Liberation Front, perhaps? Elegant rooms full of valuable furniture rather than the 1930s monstrosities in our part? The bed in our room had a convex mattress and we spent all night trying not to roll off. The weather, too, was not kind. It poured every day so we did most of our sightseeing through a blur of raindrops and we video-ed spectacular thunderstorms at night. We made the mistake of doing a load of laundry in the washing machine which then took four days to dry.

Yet none of this mattered. We felt at home in the region as we never had before. We had admired all our past holiday haunts but this one absorbed us and we no longer felt like visitors. We loved the small scale and green colours of the landscape: so much of France was too vast, too barren or too mountainous for us to feel at ease in the longterm. This was hilly, wooded and in many ways reminiscent of our own Cheshire surroundings. The climate was more gentle than the searing heat of the South and warmer than the near-British North.

Following a road at random during a rainy afternoon drive, we stumbled upon a village which took our breath away. Ségur le Château stands on the banks of a curve in the Auvèzere river, overlooked by the ruins of a 12th century castle. The backs of the old houses rise up out of the river and as

we parked to watch, swallows were skimming the surface of the fast-flowing water to catch insects. We were captivated by the beauty and timeless quality of the place.

Between showers we went to Oradour-sur-Glane, whose inhabitants were brutally massacred by the Nazis in June 1944 before the village was set on fire. The whole site is a national monument, lovingly maintained in its ruined state and profoundly moving to explore. Fifty years later only the metal objects have survived and almost every house has the skeletons of a bicycle, a Singer sewing machine and a bedstead amid its scorched stones. Visitors (one could almost call them pilgrims) speak in whispers and the overwhelming sound is of birdsong. It's an appalling reminder of the savagery of which the human race is capable. The experience haunted us — for days we could think of nothing else — and cemented us even deeper in our emotional attachment to the Limousin.

We returned to England knowing that we'd found the place where we wanted to plant our roots, but having no idea when or if it would be possible.

In early 1994 we had some astounding news from a solicitor in our home town in Lincolnshire. We learned that Jack, his mother and our sons were among the residuary legatees of Jack's much-loved second cousin Joyce. She had been instrumental in us meeting as a 14-year-old schoolgirl and 18-year-old sixth former when we both helped at her riding school, and she told my anxious mother that "Jack would do for Anne to practise on". We were engaged when I was 18 and married four days after my 21st birthday. We celebrated our silver wedding in 1994.

Joyce was wealthy and shrewd, although she always lived frugally. A true eccentric, she loved to make-do-and-mend, to buy second-hand bargains, to repair equipment until it disintegrated and to hold things together with baler twine. Her

kindness to others was legendary and her generosity had always enabled Jack to do things that would otherwise have been out of his reach. His parents had separated during the war and his mother had struggled along fiercely on a tiny income. Joyce had provided opportunities to use his budding DIY skills building her stables, clearing her land and fencing her fields. When he showed an aptitude for dinghy sailing she “bought herself” a racing dinghy, built to Jack’s specifications, and said he could have it on permanent loan provided she had one outing a year. She gave me unlimited riding on her ponies for a flat rate of five shillings a week on condition that I helped teach the other riders. Never married, she gave her time unstintingly to her ponies, dogs and other people’s children. She was generous with gifts to our family each Christmas and our sons always kept in touch. As she grew older and more eccentric the stench in her house of dogs and steaming saucepans of indescribable dog meat were a penance endured gladly in order to enjoy her company. We were pleased that just before she died of cancer in 1993 we were able to visit her in hospital and thank her for the enormous influence she’d had on our lives. It had never occurred to us that she might leave us anything more than a few hundred pounds.

When we found out about the considerable size of the legacy we knew exactly what she’d want us to do with it. It wasn’t destined for the building society or stocks and shares — it was to be spent adventurously on a project that would expand our horizons yet again. An old house in the Limousin would be her monument, and at least half the fun would be the DIY we would need to do to renovate it. It would be sacrilege to put Joyce’s money into a neat little ready-made apartment or maisonette. Work, sweat and muddy boots would be essential.

For the past two or three years we had been subscribing to

Living France magazine. Each month we'd examine the house advertisements minutely, fantasise and choose our favourite property. In the beginning the magazine was crammed with ads for homes to renovate from about £12,000, and we dreamed of buying a farmhouse with a couple of acres for about £15,000. As time went on, the prices went up and the number of properties on offer came down, but our monthly trawl through the ads was a much enjoyed ritual. We kept the magazines in the bathroom and read through them daily at times of contemplation. Our stone-built "fantasy home" had a wood, a stream, a barn, an attic and a cellar. (In our wildest dreams it was a picturesque water mill, in need of loving care, where Jack could play with the millstream and generate electricity). It was in an unspoilt hamlet and there were no other English people for miles around. It was habitable, but we were happy to start off in primitive conditions. We knew this was an impossible quest but we told ourselves to aim high and compromise later.

We promptly booked a *gîte* for two weeks in June in an unfamiliar part of the Limousin, to the East of Limoges, to act as a base for househunting. Chris and his girlfriend Linda agreed to come too. They were electronic engineering students on a year "out" in industry and both loved France.

In April Jack and I started our campaign in earnest. We wrote to all the English and French estate agents in *Living France* who covered the Limousin and also ventured over the border into Allier, where the prices were dearer but there seemed to be more properties available. We described our "fantasy house" and gave a price limit of £20,000, which was within the amount of the expected legacy. We faxed those who gave their fax numbers and then sat back to wait for replies.

Nothing happened for about three weeks and we got tetchy. Then there was great excitement one Saturday morning when

the first faxed answer came back. Other replies flowed in and we spent hours hunched over the Michelin map with a magnifying glass trying to find the hamlets where the various properties were situated. We soon found that our fantasy house did not exist, at least not in our stated price range. The more snooty agents said as much and politely ridiculed all suggestions of a watermill.

In lieu of being able to do something decisive, we filled the hours of anticipation by creating charts specifying the attributes of each property we liked, and adding questions that needed to be answered. Has this house got a septic tank? Does that one have a pond? Is the roof really sound or is an optical illusion? We pounced on every detail in the descriptions, comparing each "*fermette* suitable for renovation" with its rivals. The fat file with its neat transparent punched pockets filled with agents' photocopied particulars became a vital document.

We discounted the homes in the Allier as too expensive and were relieved to find that prices in the Limousin seemed to be lower than anywhere else in France. We hadn't deliberately plumped for the cheapest area, but it was a bonus, even if our ideal home was elusive.

We sent for books on buying and renovating a house in France and taught ourselves all about the French system of selling property, which uses an impartial government lawyer (*notaire*) to draw up the agreements. We learned about moving money to France and opening a bank account. We re-read our stack of *Living France* magazines for snippets of information we'd missed when the dream was just a dream.

Then we saw an advertisement for a French property exhibition at Harrogate in a couple of days' time and managed to book places at the seminars on house renovation and the legalities of buying a home in France.

The exhibition was exciting because we were suddenly

surrounded by likeminded people who had either done what we intended to do or were equally determined to. It no longer seemed a sort of private perversion pursued behind closed doors. We were suddenly putting our names on lists and telling agents that we were going to the Limousin for two weeks in June to buy a house. We were allowing a week for looking and a week for signing the first contract. The professionals didn't seem to think we were crazy.

The legal expert, however, did. His first words in his seminar were: "If you are thinking of buying a house in France, my advice is DON'T." His audience gasped. We were not sure if he was having a bad day (it was the umpteenth day of the travelling exhibition and he'd already done the talk repeatedly) or being horribly honest. He advised renting first in the area where you wanted to live, so that you could pick and choose among the available properties and make sure you knew the district — sensible advice, but we couldn't follow it. We simply didn't have the time. He made the legal transaction sound like a minefield. "Many English people buying property in France leave their brains behind in Dover," he added and told us some disaster stories. "Don't go to a *notaire* whose documents are typed out on an ancient typewriter in an old-fashioned office," he warned. "He will probably have spent the afternoon playing golf with the vendor and won't do you any favours." It was all a sobering antidote to the earlier euphoria and probably very necessary.

We recognised one of the agencies who had been slow to reply to our correspondence and arranged to see three of their properties on the Tuesday of our first week in June. We also made a rendezvous with another agent who specialised in the Limousin but did not advertise in *Living France*.

Now all our househunting days were accounted for and we just had to contain our mounting excitement as June approached. We'd worked out a list of 20 houses we wanted

to see and had graded them in desirability according to their photographs and descriptions. We could repeat parrot-fashion everything the agents had cared to write about them. We were ready to get Grade A in Advanced Level House-buying. Only time would tell if the cramming had been worth it.