

Left: a postcard of the watermill shortly after it was built

Main picture: the house as it is today

Below left: Trisha admires her handiwork

Below right: the giant waterwheel

Recognise it? This magnificently restored watermill in central France is a celebrity in its own right. It's been featured on TV, as well as numerous property pages and websites. It's even depicted on a stained-glass window in the local church. It's a special place with an amazing story – and who better to tell us about it than its current owner, Trisha Mason?

Trisha first came across the mill, called 'Le Moulin des Combes', on a family holiday in the Limousin region of France in 1987. "I wasn't looking to buy a property," she says. "In fact, it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do."

However, destiny intervened and Trisha was struck by Cupid's arrow. "I fell in love with a house that just happened to be in France. I would have bought it wherever it was," she says.

Back in 1987, the mill was completely overgrown. It had been empty for nigh-on 50 years, there was no electricity, no running water and there weren't

many doors and windows left intact.

"I spotted the spire from the bell-tower above a forest of trees," recalls Trisha, "and I could hear the sound of running water. I went to find out where it was coming from – and an enormous building suddenly emerged from the undergrowth."

In fact, it had been hidden there for the previous half-century. "It was just sitting there, tired and unloved, waiting for me!" she laughs.

Set in the heart of the Limousin countryside, near the little village of Châteauponsac, the watermill was built 120 years ago by a rich Parisian family. They built three properties, one for each of their sons – the mill was the second project. Limousin was chosen because it was said to have the best hunting and fishing in France.

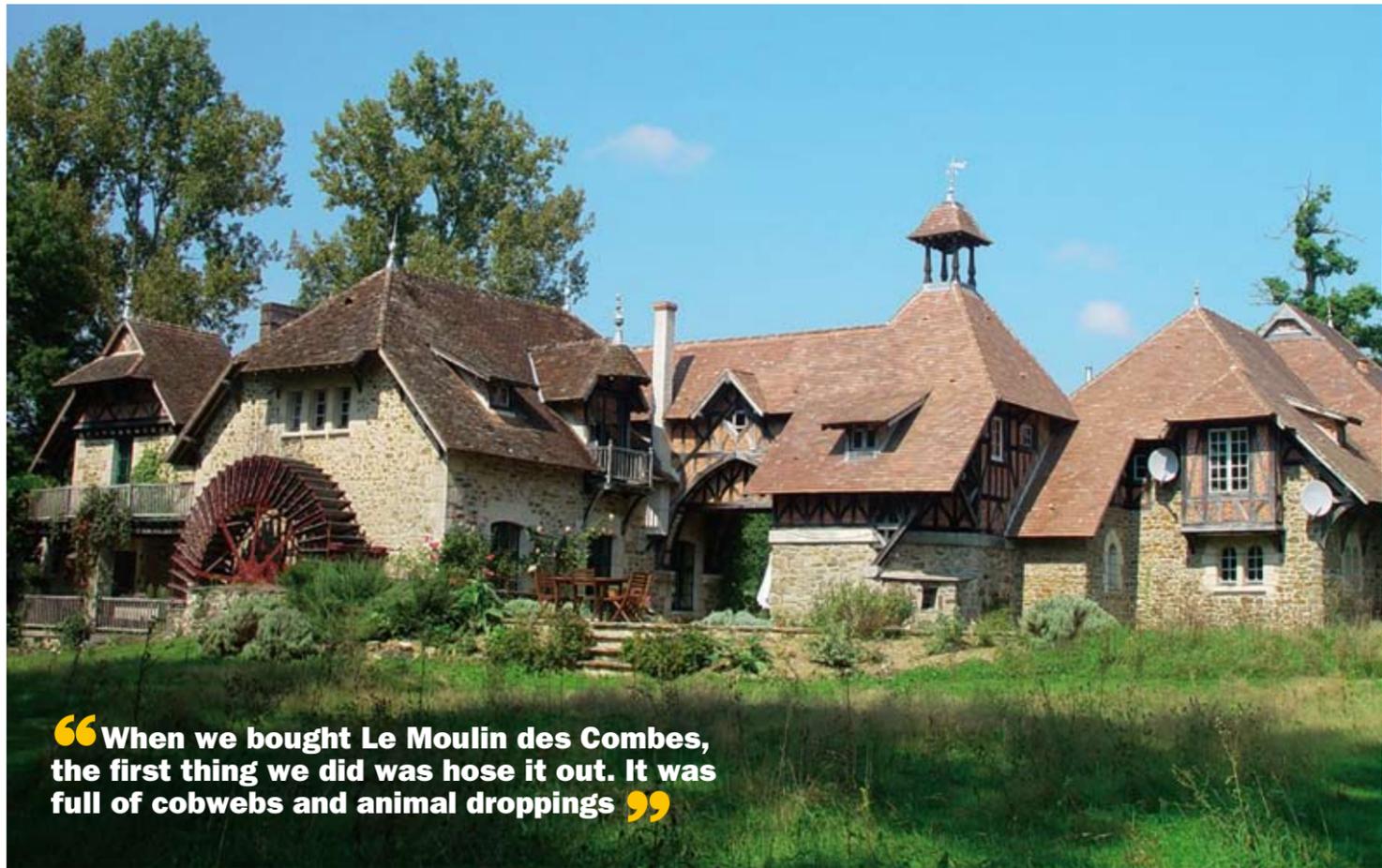
Over time, the family abandoned the mill, and when Germany occupied France in the Second World War it became a hub of local Resistance activity. "There is evidence that the underground operated here sometime during the war," explains Trisha. "We

# Love at first sight

WHEN TRISHA MASON STUMBLED ACROSS AN OLD WATERMILL IN THE HEART OF THE FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE, SHE FELL HEAD-OVER-HEELS IN LOVE. MANY YEARS OF RENOVATION WORK LATER, SHE'S THE OWNER OF AN IDYLIC HOME

WORDS DAN SAVERY PICTURES TRISHA MASON/VEF





“When we bought Le Moulin des Combes, the first thing we did was hose it out. It was full of cobwebs and animal droppings”



**MY PLACE**  
**TRISHA MASON**

**What:** A magnificent watermill separated into two three-bedroom dwellings, with acres of woodland.

**Where:** The property is near Châteauponsac, Limousin in central/southern France.

**How much:** Trisha bought 'Le Moulin des Combes' in 1987 for the equivalent of £50,000.

**Current value:** Now, after more than 15 years of renovation work, she is selling the property for €950,000 (£646,930).

**And now:** Trisha runs her own business specialising in French property – VEF ([www.vefuk.com](http://www.vefuk.com)).

found several objects hidden under the floorboards. When we took them along to the museum, they were identified as standard kit for English paratroopers.”

The mill was abandoned again after the war and remained a ruin until Trisha came along and gave it the kiss of life. However, in Shakespeare’s words, “The course of true love never did run smooth” – and the renovation took an incredible 15 years to finish.

“The first thing we did was to get water from the supply outside in the street and hose the whole place out,” says Trisha. “The house was covered in cobwebs and animal droppings. Trust me, it takes a long time to hose down a house. When it had dried out, we painted everything white.”

All the renovation work was done on a very tight budget, with Trisha calling on different generations of her family to help out. Her father, who was in his 80s, worked alongside a builder, and Trisha’s daughter (who was 14 at the time) got electricity going in the house – incredibly, she learnt how to do this from a library book.

At this early stage, they still had to shower in the garden. Every obstacle overcome was a significant step

forward. For instance, there was a small celebration on the day they got their first light bulb working.

As family and friends joined in, the work became fun. Each school holiday Trisha would go down to France and do a bit more. “We used to work all morning and then we’d have lunch, knock off and go to the lakes for a swim,” she says. “Then, in the evening, we’d have dinner together and be up early next morning to start work again.”

Some people make the mistake of throwing too much money at projects when they start off, but Trisha’s budget was so small that this was not a temptation. “In any case, your ideas change when you live in a property,” she says. “The last thing we did was replace the wood on the big waterwheel and that was actually the most expensive job of all as regards materials.”

The watermill is still in working order, and the gentle stream that runs through the property ends up in the River Loire. The mill sits in the valley (hence it’s name, which translates as ‘The Mill of the Valleys’), with woodlands sloping up to hills at the top, where you can often see deer and wildfowl. The property also includes



a large, well-tended garden and about ten acres of woodland.

The property is split into two separate dwellings – an east and west wing, joined at first-floor level by a bridge. In each of the dwellings there are three en-suite bedrooms, large kitchen/dining rooms, living rooms and library/games rooms. There is also a separate one-bed caretaker’s house, with its own living room and kitchen.

It’s an enormous property, perfect for large groups of people looking to wind-down in beautiful surroundings and enjoy an idyllic country holiday.

Trisha describes the interior decor as “in keeping with the English Arts and Crafts movement. Stenciled vines creep across the walls and each room has its own individual style.”

Trisha’s hard work has obviously paid off. When she bought the mill in

**Facing page: the property is set in two acres of well-tended gardens and surrounded by woods**

**Clockwise from bottom right: a disused waterwheel takes pride of place in the sitting room; the restored fireplace adds a touch of grandeur; warm tones make this bedroom both cosy and sensual; the classic country-style kitchen; stylish simplicity is the order of the day in the attic bedroom**

1987 (in francs), it cost the equivalent of £50,000. Now, it’s worth in the region of €950,000 (£646,930).

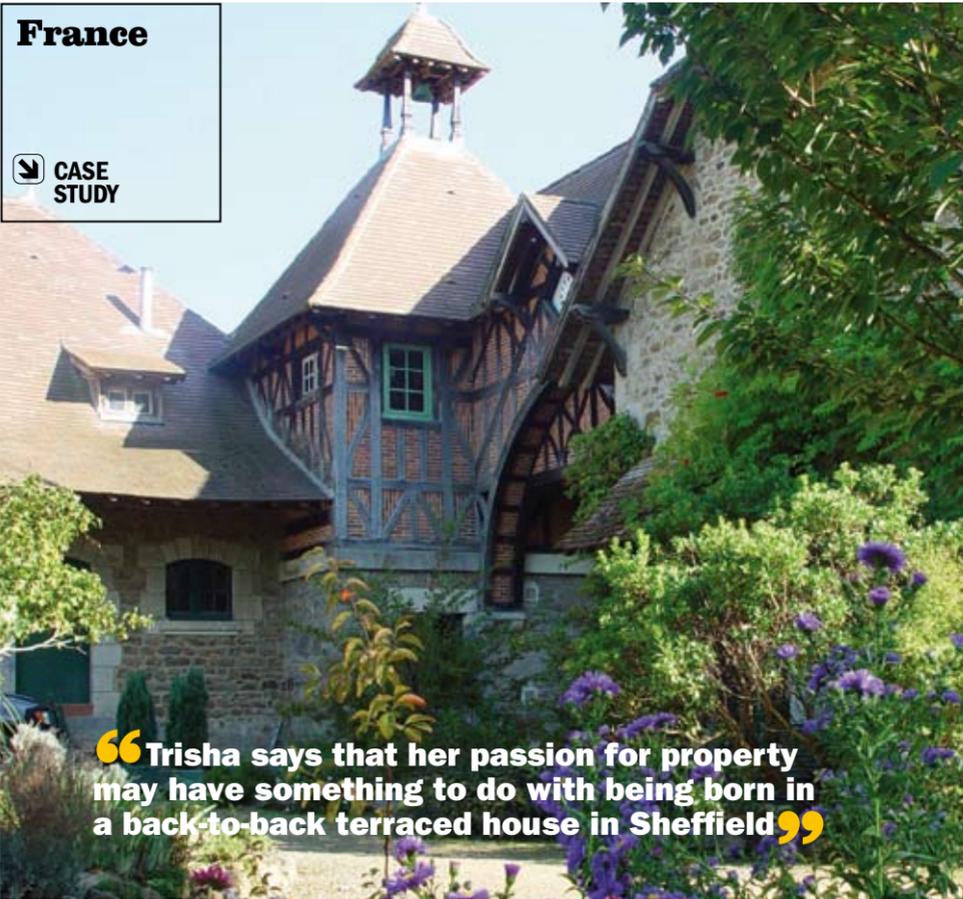
Not surprisingly, Trisha believes that, if you buy the right property and are prepared to put the work in, France is a great place to invest. “This place would have cost a lot more if we had paid builders to do what we did,” she says. “The hardest thing of all was dealing with French bureaucracy – but I eventually learnt how to do that by trial and error.”

Little did she know at the time, but the mill was just the start of Trisha’s career in French property. Within three months of buying the mill, people started asking her to find properties for them. In the last six months of 1987, she helped six members of her friends and family buy property, and by 1988 she had her own company –



## France

CASE STUDY



“Trisha says that her passion for property may have something to do with being born in a back-to-back terraced house in Sheffield”

VEF (Vivre En France). It's now one of the leading French property specialists.

Trisha says the key to her success is “loving people and loving property” and the fact that she “never gives up”. She admits that she is “totally and utterly addicted to renovation” – her new project is restoring a big old farmhouse, with a vineyard and olive grove in Avignon.

However, it wasn't always like this. Trisha came from relatively humble beginnings. She says that her passion for property may have something to do with being born in a gloomy back-to-back terraced house in Sheffield.”

Before getting into property, Trisha had her own company manufacturing clothes. “I ran my own business from the age of 24,” she says, “then I got into property management in east London and started to build a portfolio of properties.” At the moment, she spends most of her time in her London or Dublin offices, but manages to get out to France every weekend.

Trisha has two grown-up children. Her daughter now lives in France and her son in England where he heads VEF's sister company, Validus ([www.validus-invest.com](http://www.validus-invest.com)), an investment company that specialises in emerging markets.

As one of the leading experts in her

**Above: after being unloved for many years, the property has benefited from a healthy dose of TLC**

**Below: an ideal spot to enjoy some of the fine local cuisine**

field, Trisha is optimistic about the French property market: “Nowadays people can get almost anywhere in France with a cheap airline, so what determines where people buy is budget and climate,” she says. “A lot of people are buying new-build and some people are purchasing through the government's leaseback scheme.”

Aside from the money to be made, the high quality of life also attracts people to France – and at the heart of *la vie Française* is food. Trisha is a big fan of French cuisine and loves to cook. The Limousin region is well



regarded for its beef and trout. “It's different to northern France where everything's laden in butter,” she says, “It's good-quality food, simply cooked.”

The Limousin is known as the lake district of France. Popular local pastimes include walking, fishing, boating and hunting. If you need to escape the quiet rural life for a while, then Limoges is only half-an-hour away by car. It's a lively university city with a beautiful cathedral, museum, lots of restaurants and its own airport.

It's a wonderful part of the world and Trisha has thoroughly enjoyed her time here. However, all good things must come to an end and she has reluctantly decided it is time to put the mill on the market. A new chapter in its story is about to begin.

Her advice to others looking to buy and renovate a property is: “Don't think, do. It doesn't matter if you make a mistake, just carry on and enjoy life.”

### For more details

Visit [www.luxurymill.com](http://www.luxurymill.com) to find out about holidays at the mill; for more information on French property, go to [www.vefuk.com](http://www.vefuk.com)

## ESSENTIALS

### Top five renovation tips

- Before you start renovation work, it is always worth getting a professional survey of the property. This should prevent any nasty surprises cropping up later.
- It is important to source as much material as possible from local areas. This is not only a cheaper way of obtaining what you need, but it will also help to keep your property looking authentic.
- It can be a mistake to varnish oak beams. Wood expands and contracts with the temperature of the season and cracking can occur.
- Keep the design realistic. It's all too easy to get caught up with ideas of your 'dream' property and go over the top with stylish but impractical features.
- If you wish to dramatically alter the appearance of the outside of your property, you may need to apply for planning permission via a *Certificat d'Urbanisme Positif*.