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The town of Bellac sits at the confluence of the Gartempe and Vincou rivers

Back to life

Rebecca and Steve Johnson revamped an old ruin – giving it and their family a new lease of life, they tell **Nicola Venning**

When Becky Johnson realised she had driven from her home in a village in Haute-Vienne to the neighbouring town of Bellac, 35 times in one week, she knew something had to change.

She, her husband Steve and their three sons had lived in the village for 15 years, but now they were spending more and more time in Bellac. It was where Becky was employed as an English teacher; Steve's work as a builder often took him there and their sons, Eli 17, Seth 14 and Jacques 12, were all at school in the small town.

"We wanted to move to Bellac for a while so we could have access to all the clubs, restaurants and bars, without having to drive everywhere. Because bus services around here are unimpressive to say the least," says Becky.

But finding the right home, was not easy. They had looked on and off for a while, but nothing "right" had come up. Then Steve, who was doing

some restoration work on a house in the town, had a nose to the rundown property next door to it. Excited, he immediately told Becky that she had to come and have a look. "You're going to love it", he said. And she did.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

"The front door looks like the entrance to a medieval castle, and it was one of the first things that drew me to the house." However, Becky was less enthusiastic about the staircase, half of which had collapsed. The windows were smashed and there was a tree growing out of the attic.

The owner had put on a new roof about 30 years ago to prevent any further damage and Steve was convinced the house looked worse than it actually was. "He felt that once we had the stairs sorted, it wouldn't be too bad, especially as the roof was in perfect nick. He said the collapsed staircase was our biggest bonus because 95% of potential buyers would



It's hard to believe that the house had broken windows and a tree growing out of the attic



Rebecca and Steve worked hard to get everything shipshape for the new school year

“A craftsman friend rebuilt the helix shape of the staircase, it’s lovely now”

walk away. He thought he could get the stairs done for less than five grand and everything else was manageable.”

The townhouse, which had been split into four separate apartments, dates from the 1750s though most of the property was built in the 19th century. Local estate agent Chris Summers of Beaux Villages Estate Agency, which sells homes across southwest France, contacted the owner who was happy to sell along with a run-down property next door. They soon agreed a price of €66,000, which included both properties and the *notaire’s* and estate agent fees of €6,000 each (€12,000 in total). Steve and Becky put their own place on the market. “We thought it would take a year or two to sell. But Chris is very pro-active and sold it in about two days! I thought, oh no, we’re not going to have time to do anything,” she says.

Helpfully, once they had signed the legally binding *compromis de vente* (initial sale contract), but before they



fully owned the house, the owner allowed them access to make it safe. “A friend who is a craftsman knew how to repair and rebuild the helix shape of the staircase. It’s lovely now. We also replaced the windows and cleared stuff. There was so much rubbish. The old roof had been left inside when the new one had been put on and we had so much rubble to clear. We had teams and teams of people and lots of teenage boys, carrying sacks and sacks of rubble out,” says Becky.

Once the sale was finalised, the family were able to move in at the end of June. The kitchen was basic with a makeshift camping table, a washing-up



Top: the Johnsons have created a welcoming and spacious lounge where family and friends can gather. Above: the room as it was before they got to work on it



The family bathroom, complete with cast-iron bath; (inset) before



bowl and no running water. They had one shower room and one bedroom which the boys shared, and another “which was ready-ish” for Becky and Steve. They needed to have the house liveable by the start of September when the boys returned to school. It was all hands on deck!

“When you renovate, you’re supposed to start at the top and work down, but Steve went against the rule book. The spaces we needed the most were kitchen, bathroom and then bedrooms for the boys. We wanted them to each have

their own room before the next school term started.”

They undertook a basic renovation, to create a kitchen and bathroom, knocking down walls, painting and rewiring. At the same time, they wanted to make the house as energy efficient as possible.

The ceilings in each room are about 3m high, which meant the house would cost a fortune to heat, so it was important the building was well insulated. Glass wool wall insulation was fitted, radiators installed as well as two pellet-burning wooden stoves in the living area. “In the winter, it’s now a very warm house,” says Becky.

They were also keen to keep as many of the period features



“The house still had beautiful, albeit filthy, original oak floors of wide wood planks”



Top: the understated helix staircase steals the show in the hallway. Above: before the work – the dark and dingy, rubble-strewn space. Right, from top: the restored oak floors with their ‘ladder-style’ pattern; before renovation

as possible. The house still had beautiful, albeit filthy, original oak floors of wide wood planks bisected by thin oak strips running the length of the room, typical of the 18th-century ‘ladder style’ of the area and which Becky was keen to keep.

“In one of the rooms, vandals had poured gloss paint mixed with glass all over the floor. It took me two days with a heat-gun to scrape all that off; then I did a light sand and polish. It was hard work but it came up like a dream. I was delighted with it,” says Becky.

Another renovation project, albeit a much smaller one, was an old patchy cast-iron bath

that the owner had left behind. “I cleaned and bleached the hell out of the insides and wire-brushed and sanded the flaky paint off the exterior and claw feet. Then I gave it three coats of paint, allowing a day to dry between each,” she explains. Four days later, the bath was finished. It now has pride of place in the family bathroom.

Steve worked on the house full-time for about five weeks and then part-time for the rest of the summer. “We moved in at the end of June and had a basic kitchen and bathroom by the end of July. Then we had to wait a while for replacement planks for some of the floor.

But the bedrooms were ready with a week to spare, just before school started.”

Becky and Steve have the whole of the top floor while the boys have a spacious bedroom each, with plenty of room for a desk, sofa and an area for sleepovers. Although there are still snagging issues (there is a bathroom to complete and a window seat needs to be made), the basic renovation has been completed. “And we came in on budget at £55,000.”

Becky estimates that if they’d hired builders and paid the market rate, the renovation would have cost approximately £200,000. “Look behind the

muck. Get quotes for anything that looks awful and do as much as you can yourself,” she says.

They have already started to renovate the rundown property next door and plan to use it for holiday lets as well as create a guest suite for visiting family and friends. They are also going to turn their cellar into a gym.

However, one of the nicest restoration projects has been the garden, which was very overgrown and had all but disappeared when they bought it. “We started clearing it before we fully owned the house and discovered figs, fruit trees and honeysuckle. There is also a well, which we found on our third visit. It was a cared-for garden once upon a time and we are making it lovely again.”

A FRESH START

Besides the house, the move has also enhanced the family’s lifestyle. They particularly enjoy being part of the local community and it is easier for her sons to take part in all the clubs. Most of all, they just love French life. “When my kids come back from school and I ask what they had for lunch, they never say ‘cheese’, they say ‘camembert’ or ‘reblochon’ or whatever. Food is so much part of the culture here.”

This is particularly true in Bellac, which has a very good regular market selling a broad range of local produce as well as oysters. The Charente coast and La Rochelle are only three hours’ scenic drive away and the family visit regularly. The house is now as close to her dream home as it could be.

“We are on the edge of town, but a two-minute walk to the bars and shops,” she says. “From here I can see the countryside, the medieval stone bridge and the medieval church. I love it!” ■