

PROPERTY

Normandy landing

Claire Briarty went in search of a dream house in France

RECENTLY we decided it was time to make the family dream of owning a country property in France come true. Our "studio with sea view" in Normandy went up for sale, and the property hunt began in earnest.

We dismissed the Dordogne area as being too full of English bridge players, dabbled with the idea of the vineyards of the Charente, and eventually decided to return to our beloved Normandy.

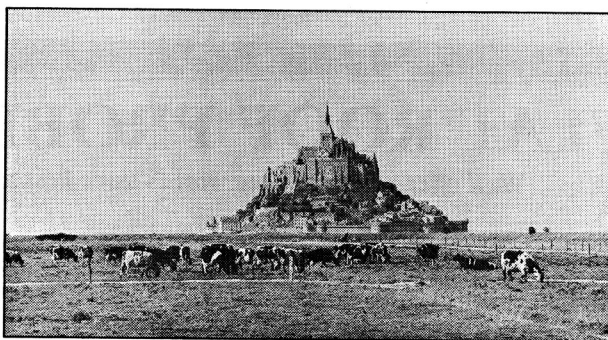
It resembles the England of Enid Blyton novels; the England that we all read about but never found — full of craggy beaches inviting intrepid explorers. Its orchards are laden with blossom and later, with bright hard apples. The farms are still family-run, with fields of docile, creamy-coloured cows, and even in the small towns you can find smart boutiques catering for the ever-present Parisian market.

I won't pretend that finding the property of your dreams is easy. It isn't, especially when you don't know exactly what you want. Pleasing all the family is no small factor, even if there are only three of us.

Having bought our flat five years ago gave us a few advantages, not least that of understanding the idiosyncracies of French estate agents. Unlike the British system of picking up as much free blurb as you like and finding the properties yourself, the prospective buyer in France has his or her hopes and desires discussed at length and is then ferried from one property to another.

They aren't just being supportive; there are practical reasons for this attention. One is the quaint fact that many properties have no address and are consequently difficult, if not impossible, to find.

It is worth noting that the property market in France is far slower than in



INFIELDING: Cows graze at Mont St Michel in Normandy PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN HARRIS

the UK; even taking the British slump into account. Buying as an investment is largely regarded as a waste of money by the French. As a result, property turnover is slower and prices have remained more stable.

Our ideal property had to be reasonably old and attractive; run-down enough for us to be able to do with as we liked, but able to be lived in immediately, with a fairly large plot, near

Granville (one of Normandy's principal towns) and the sea.

The property we eventually found consists of four original plots, built at right angles to a road with a stream as the far boundary. There is a garage, a pretty cottage, a stable, the main house, two barns and the remains of more barns built haphazardly from wood, stone and torchis.

Finding lost treasures is always part

of the fun of buying an old property. We were blessed with no Dutch masters or Ming vases, but did inherit an iron bedstead, a bent wooden fireplace, and a wonderful but useless full-sized cider barrel. There were also some unsavoury, smelly legacies from the last occupants — lobster fishermen.

First of all, relations had to be built up with local artisans, and their philosophy understood. Our first "consultation" with the roofing contractor consisted largely of an animated discussion about his family farm accompanied by two generous aperitifs.

Perhaps the fact that we were enthusiastically pro-French and spoke the language helped us on our way. The neighbours all around have welcomed us with invitations, information on the house, and almost a sigh of relief. It seems that even eccentric English people are an improvement on smelly lobster fishermen. . . ♣

● Useful reading on the topic is *Living in France: The Essential Guide for Property Purchasers and Residents*, by Philip Holland. It is due to be published by Robert Hale in its sixth edition at the end of May (£14.95).

● Mortgage rates are tumbling following this week's 0.5 per cent base rate cut. See *Money Guardian*, in today's *Outlook* section, for details of cheaper borrowing.

DOUBLE TAKE

SUNDAY

The churches, the shops and our choices are all wide open. So what will become of the Seventh Day?

SHOPPING AROUND

Sunday is for searching;
We used to look
In the big black book
We'd open after churching.

But now we've turned from priests and popes
And stay at home for sex and soaps.

For Sunday's for the taking;
We shop around
For firmer ground,
Tired of all the faking.

And over joints of beef or grass
We ponder what will come to pass.

Is Sunday just for rambling?
It's time to choose
And some will lose
For all of us are gambling.

With too much doubt to be devout
We search for what the day's about.

WORDS: STEPHEN CLARK / PICTURE: RICHARD MADDEN

