

CASTLES IN THE AIR

Philip and Patricia Hawkes have been proud custodians of a Burgundy château for more than 30 years. They explain its enduring appeal to Paul Shearer

IMAGES: JULIAN ELLIOTT



Philip and Patricia Hawkes, have, on the occasional sunny summer's day, taken to the water for a little leisurely boating in the moat at their country home, Château de Missery.

In the winter, when the Burgundy winter freezes the moat, it stops being a boating lake but has instead been used to host an international croquet competition for the visiting guests. These are the mild eccentricities that the Hawkes brought with them to France where, for more than 30 years, they have enjoyed the beauty of this listed 18th-century château on the edge of the Morvan park in the north-eastern part of Burgundy about three quarters of an hour's drive from Dijon.

Philip and Patricia bought Château de Missery in 1979 and have used it as their family home ever since, dividing their time between the moated mansion and an apartment in Paris.

The beautiful château has stood undisturbed in a sleepy and tranquil landscape for decades and the elaborate and complex ecosystem of

man and nature, developed over the centuries, wraps the old stones in a comforting blanket of serenity. Of course there were some tense moments as one looks back: two world wars, the siege of Paris, the French Revolution, the Wars of Religion..., but there were also some periods of astonishing wealth.

Château de Missery is an expression of two such periods: an 18th-century residence built on the vestiges of an earlier medieval castle. There's a generous dining room hung with portraits; a sitting room which opens onto a wide terrace overlooking the moat; kitchen with a quirky collection of coathangers; a breakfast room; a magnificent hallway with stone flagged floor and sundry other offices on the ground floor plus a collection of high-ceilinged and light-filled bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs.

For the couple, this was not a mad spur-of-the-moment choice but

These pages, clockwise from left: the imposing exterior of the château; the Hawkes family; an impressive fireplace





a purchase made with considerable care and expertise. Together with Patricia, Philip, who trained as a solicitor, opened up an estate agency in Paris in 1986, having previously worked for a decade selling châteaux for Hampton's International.

They have been enthusiastic promoters of French *patrimoine* by selling glorious buildings all over France. Philip thinks that he might be one of the oldest members of Vieilles Maisons Françaises, an association of owners and devotees of historic buildings, having joined in 1966. Even before that, during his student days, Philip was wont to drive around France and stare at the architectural treasures that are sprinkled all over the country.

"French architects had a magnificent talent for making quite modest houses seem very grandiose through symmetry and decoration with a result that is very joyful," says Philip.

"The perfect age to buy is when you are in your thirties with young children who can run around the space and grow up to appreciate the beauty," adds Patricia.

As the couple ease themselves into retirement, they are passing on the reins of the chateau to their daughter Lucy, and are opening up the chateau to paying guests for the first time.

The chateau can accommodate up to 18 people at a time as long as there are some couples in the group sharing beds and others who are happy to share a room and bathroom. Groups may be celebrating a special occasion or they may want to use the chateau as a base for exploring the beautiful surrounding countryside. Food-lovers are especially well catered for because the village is located in the heart of Burgundy, which is a gourmet's paradise. Lucy, now

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châtelaine, describes the experience. "Missery is a classic French chateau, which oozes English eccentricity. We offer groups and families a unique and beautiful place in which to come together to celebrate a special occasion or merely to enjoy each other's company for a weekend or week-long stay.

"A pianist might while away his day filling the hall with music, while others sun themselves by the *bassin*, and the rest sample Burgundy wines with a local *vigneron*. As the sun sets over the moat, all can then gather around a lavish dining table,

recounting tales of their day while tucking into a delicious feast and local produce; washed down with a *kir royale* or *prune maison*."

And it's possible to have Philip and Patricia stay and help. They are both excellent hosts and have a network of contacts in the area that can fill the days with something that Burgundy does very well, namely eating and drinking. During my visit, Burgundy wine-maker, Bertrand Devillard, from Domaines Devillard, had been invited over to take us through a selection of wines, both reds and whites from some of his wine plots in different parts of Burgundy.

He began with an explanation of the importance and complexity of Burgundy within French wine-making: out of 550 *appellation d'origine contrôlée* wines in France, 100 are from Burgundy, he told us. A wine designated AOC guarantees a quality control of a wine both in terms of the grape varieties from which it is made and the area in which they are grown. In Burgundy, these AOC areas include some of the most famous wines in the world: Chablis, Meursault, Pommard, Romanée Conti and Nuits-St-Georges. ▶

This page, above: the chateau is set on beautiful grounds
This page, inset: local wine-maker Bertrand Devillard
Facing page, clockwise from top left: daughter Lucy is taking over the reins of the business; the moat is used for boating in the summer; an original staircase; afternoon sun casts a glow on the chateau



During a stay, guests enjoy dinner made from fresh produce from the abundant walled vegetable garden and evenings will often be rounded off with some rousing round-the-table singing after dinner. “Learn our family drinking song...” says the Missery website “... try racing demon, playing a fast hand of cards with a circle of up to 10 opponents, gather round the grand piano, where the acoustics match the best concert halls, to sing and listen, dance on the lawn, play the cereal box game! Finally, fall asleep in front of a film from Lucy’s collection – all genres, all languages and all good!”

It’s as if a PG Wodehouse weekend house party has landed in the middle of the French countryside. A strong rhythm develops as the day is planned over the morning croissant and coffee: some want to take in the sights including the architectural treasures

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of Vézelay, or the nearby abbeys of Fontenay, and Cluny. Others want to laze in the walled garden by the round pond and read; a third group decides to organise the day’s food. Each to their own until cocktail hour brings people back together, keen to tell the stories of their own afternoon adventures. This is life at a gentler pace and all the while the swans swim serenely across the moat’s surface.

Missery is an experience of style, but not necessarily of luxury. As least not luxury as conceived in the modern, centrally heated plasma-television-in-every-room sense of the word. If luxury to you means a chilled glass of wine and some sparkling conversation then Château de Missery has this in abundance. If, however, luxury is 24-hour room service with wifi in every nook and cranny then perhaps the hotels in the nearby towns of Saulieu, Vézelay or Avallon would suit you better.

“People often describe or expect châteaux to be luxurious, of course not realising that they were never



This page, above: guests enjoy dinner at Château de Missery

FACT BOX

🏰 Buildings can be either *classés monuments historiques* or *inscrits monuments historiques* signifying their national or regional architectural importance.

🏰 Listed status imposes responsibilities on the owners to preserve and maintain the buildings but the owners can also benefit from state grants and tax benefits as well as expert supervision from *Bâtiments de France* and the Ministry of Culture.

🏰 There are approximately 42,000 listed buildings in France, of which about a third are houses, with approximately half in private hands. Overall, roughly a third are *monuments classés*, with two thirds *inscrits*. The way the total divides through history is that a third of the listed buildings are from the Middle Ages, almost half from the 16th to 18th centuries. The Eiffel Tower became a *monument historique* in 1964. Of the total, 6% are listed gardens.

🏰 There are 36,000 *communes* across France and each one is said to have at least one château.

built like that,” says Philip. He shudders at the often unnecessary interior redesigns that are made in the name of improvements to historic buildings, feeling, like many others that minimum intervention is the way to approach the fabric of France’s rich array of historic buildings.

They have shown that living in a historic house is possible without an army of servants to help you. “One of the joys of having a château is the theatrical life one leads, like running a ‘ship’ except that it never moves,” enthuses Patricia. “This is the way to bring these glorious old houses back into fashion – not as a drain on the resources (which they obviously can be) but as a place to amuse, to be amused, to have a good time among beautiful things in lovely surroundings.”

Their infectious love of French châteaux has inspired many other buyers to take the plunge and look after similar buildings which don’t reject modernity, but add to it, by reminding us of how life used to be. **LF** www.chateaudemissery.com