

Looking for an unusual French property? A former convent or monastery could be the order of the day, says **Helena Frith Powell**

In *A Time to Keep Silence* by Patrick Leigh Fermor, published in 1957, the writer and adventurer describes his stays in monasteries in France. He had to fall in with the rhythm of vespers and endure mealtimes when nobody spoke to each other – not everybody's idea of a perfect holiday. These days, however, some Britons are turning France's religious buildings into secular homes – although a vow of silence is one original feature they are not keeping.

Such a conversion has been completed by Lizzie Betts-Gosling, 54, and her girlfriend, Ali Ballantyne, 51, both formerly of Brighton, who five years ago bought an old convent in southern France. "The fact that we were two women seemed right," Ballantyne says. "We got the definite feeling, especially among the older generation in the village, that it made sense that a convent to be occupied by women."

The couple live at Le Couvent, in the Languedoc village of Roujan, a 15-minute drive northeast of Béziers. Built in about 1650, the property was donated to the church in the early 19th century by a rich, devout spinster, and was variously a religious school, a retirement home and a convent before being auctioned off by the synod of Montpellier 17 years ago. It was bought by a French couple who started converting it, but sold up when they divorced.

Betts-Gosling and Ballantyne came across the two-storey home, which they run as a B&B, by accident. They first visited the region for a wedding, and liked it so much, they decided to look at properties to buy. "Some friends of ours said there was a house for sale with our name on it," Betts-Gosling recalls. "They made us come over and look at it, and it was love at first sight. We didn't even look at anything else."

The "complete wreck" cost £250,000, and another £200,000 has been spent on renovations. "We've put in beams, floors, electricity, drains, water, five bathrooms and a swimming pool with a chemical-free ultraviolet system, and created a garden."

There is something special about living in a convent, Ballantyne claims. "We have a 6ft Madonna on the roof, which marks out this building as religious or, at the very least, out of the ordinary. Occasionally, people find her spooky, but Lizzie and I love her – she feels like something of an honour. She has her hand extended to the gate, to welcome people in, and she certainly welcomed us."

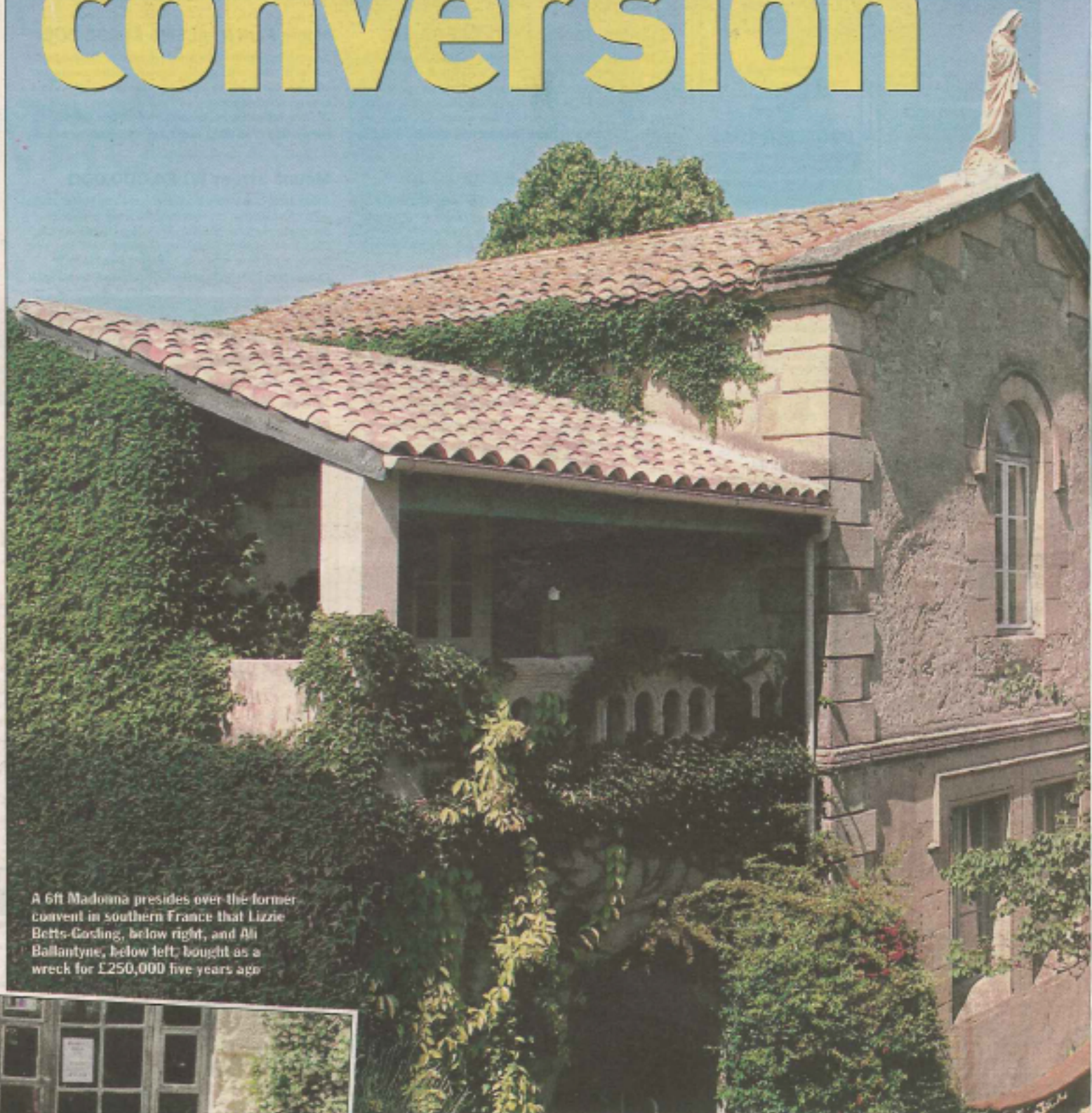
"We worry about her being struck by lightning, and right now we're completely stymied by what we should do about the swarm of bees that has decided to make a nest in her arm."

More and more British buyers are contemplating a new life in France's former religious buildings, as orders and dioceses sell off property. "Religious buildings have been coming to the market with increased regularity over the years, partly due to the high maintenance and renovation costs," says Paul Humphreys, a partner in Knight Frank's international department. "They are still fairly rare, though, so you need to be patient. They are often stone buildings, which are popular with British buyers, and the smaller ones make ideal homes and businesses, because there are often outbuildings that can be turned into *gîtes*."

That is just what Louise Bailey, 53, and her boyfriend, Stuart Budden, 45, a former swimming teacher, have done with a one-bedroom cottage in the 4,000 square metre garden of a former convent, which they bought five years ago. "We had just had enough of London," says Bailey,



Religious conversion



A 6ft Madonna presides over the former convent in southern France that Lizzie Betts-Gosling, below right, and Ali Ballantyne, below left, bought as a wreck for £250,000 five years ago

“These buildings bring a unique sense of peace, and it would be criminal to change that”

who was working for a courier company at the time. "So we started looking for an alternative. We looked in the Lake District, Kent and Lincolnshire, then we thought about France. We thought about the lifestyle, the value for money and the pace of life."

They were about to give up on the idea and opt for a house in Bailey's home county, Northumberland, when they saw Le Vieux Couvent, in the village of Deviat, about 60 miles north of Bordeaux. "We didn't even know it was an old convent at the time," Bailey says. "The agent used another name for it. But we knew it was the right place for us the minute we



Helena Pitt, Purnell, Helen Lofy



Karl and Anita O'Hanlon, top, with their three children, run a business renovating old religious buildings such as Le Couvent d'Hérépian, above

turned into the drive. We both got goose bumps and said 'This is it', before we'd even gone inside."

The couple paid £65,000 for the three-storey, five-bedroom house, which was built in 1762 and extended in 1853. The cottage is thought to have provided shelter for pilgrims.

The property hadn't changed hands for more than 30 years. "It was like a 1970s revival had taken place here. There were pinks and turquoises all over; the beams were painted a glossy green. It took us four days with a sandblaster to get it looking anywhere near decent." Bailey estimates

that they have spent at least £40,000 on renovating and redecorating.

"This is very much a home and business," she says. "But now and again, you come across reminders of what it used to be. In the cellar, there is a boarded-up circle, which I am told is the entrance to an underground passage that leads to the church across the road. When we were doing excavations for the terrace of the cottage, we found some old coins: one was British, from the 19th century, and the other Spanish, from Queen Isabella II's reign, dated 1863."

Some people like turning such properties into homes so much, it has become a full-time job. Karl O'Hanlon, 35, and his wife, Anita, 34, moved to the Languedoc with their three children two years ago. With a local partner, they run Garrigae Investissements, which specialises in sustainable tourism and turning old buildings into boutique hotels.

In the village of Hérépian, about an hour's drive from Montpellier and the Mediterranean coast, they are converting a 17th-century convent into a boutique hotel, due to open in August; they are also working on an 18th-century former Cistercian monastery in the village of Riols, in the Caroux mountains of the high Languedoc.

"They have a lot of advantages," says O'Hanlon, who is negotiating to buy a coastal abbey as well. "First, their location is normally superb; they are either in the middle of the village or in great beauty spots. Also, they were designed to be calm. Having been built around the religious communities that they housed, they tend to have a set of bedrooms around a central common area, which consists of a lounge, refectory or chapel. It makes them ideal as hotels."

But there are down sides: the convent walls, for example, are a metre thick, so changing room dimensions can be challenging. "Sourcing materials to complement the ancient can also be difficult, and you can easily stray into pastiche. Finding the right flagstones for the convent took months, but, eventually, we think we ended up with stone from the same quarry."

O'Hanlon believes it is important to stick close to the original look and feel wherever possible. "We will definitely preserve some of the religious feel, the tranquillity and calm. The gift these buildings bring is a unique sense of peace, and it would be criminal to change that."

■ *Le Couvent*; 00 33 4 67 24 64 37, www.roujan.com. Louise Bailey; 00 33 5 45 67 29 87, www.levieuxcouvent.co.uk. Garrigae Investissements; www.garrigae.com. *Le Couvent d'Hérépian*; www.couventherepian.com

French retreats



Dordogne: This former priory in Biron has been lovingly restored. It still has its original oak doors and beams, as well as flagstone floors. Built between 1499 and 1512, it housed six priests serving a local chateau, and has seven bedrooms, seven bathrooms and three reception rooms. For sale for £853,000, with Knight Frank; 020 7629 8171, www.knightfrank.co.uk



Lot: This four-bedroom convent near Prayssac dates from 1780, and its owners have spent 14 years restoring it. It is now anything but austere, with two large reception rooms, an open-plan kitchen, a library, a heated swimming pool and a low-maintenance walled garden. For sale for £369,000, with French Connections; 00 33 5 65 30 66 67, www.frenchconnections.co.uk



Luberon: This 18th-century former convent is set around a small courtyard garden. It needs renovating, but has approval to be converted into six flats. It is outside the village of Lourmarin. For sale for £362,000, with Provence Secrète; 00 33 4 32 52 90 84, www.provence-secrete.com



Charente: This restored four-bedroom house on the outskirts of Villebois-Lavalette was once part of an ancient convent. It has three reception rooms, one with a stone fireplace carved with the shell motif of St Jacques, a walled garden and a secluded swimming pool. For sale for £225,700, with Leggett Immobilier; 0870 011 5151, www.frenchestateagents.com