

Welcome to *our* village

Paul Mapley and Yip Ward couldn't afford to buy a home in the UK – now they own a whole French hamlet

LIKE MANY LONG-TERM renters, Paul Mapley and Yip Ward long harboured dreams of getting on the property ladder. Having previously lived on a narrowboat, a converted lorry and a mobile home on a friend's farm, the landscape gardeners, both 48, had never even lived somewhere with stairs.

Today, however, they preside over not one but several staircases, all situated in the row of six cottages that Mapley and Ward now call their own, together with two spacious barns, a vast bread oven, a well and a pig shed.

Situated in picturesque Normandy countryside, this cluster of stone cottages and outbuildings comprises the entire French hamlet of La Busliere. It was once home to farm workers and their families, but was abandoned in the latter half of the last century as younger generations left to find work in cities.

It's a situation reflected across swathes of France and Italy, where once chocolate-box historic villages now lie empty and neglected. Many are for sale for the price of a family car in the UK and – as the new Channel 4 series *Help! We Bought a Village* reveals – in recent years a number of plucky Brits have decided to embrace the ambitious challenge of bringing these derelict communities back to life.

Mapley and Ward initially bought just one cottage in La Busliere after being offered the opportunity to snap it up for £10,000 by a friend. "On paper, that's cheap, but we didn't even have £5,000 in the bank," says Ward.

Even so, they decided to take a look – and fell in love at first sight. "We got to the top of the lane, saw the hamlet and that was it," says Mapley.

Uninhabited for the previous 20 years, the cottage needed a leap of imagination. "There were cobwebs and hornets' nests everywhere and it stunk of damp soot," says Ward. "But we knew it had potential and we felt sad that all its history could just disappear."

Not afraid of a project, the pair – who didn't speak a word of French – decided to go for it. They were in the early days of renovations when, in April 2020, they received an unexpected piece of news: the owner of the remaining row of cottages and outbuildings was also looking to sell and was prepared to part with the lot for the relatively modest sum of £12,000.

"It was exciting, but we were panicking like mad as we'd only just raised the money to get our £10,000," says Mapley. "But we just said yes and decided to worry about it later."

The couple raised the money for the first

'We got the cottages and outbuildings for £12,000'

cottage and then the rest of the hamlet by selling some of the vintage tractors, sitting in storage, that they had collected over the years, as well as the abandoned goods from doing house clearances alongside their landscaping work.

Finally, in July 2021, the pair left their home in Kent for good, arriving in La Busliere in the converted lorry that they plan to run as a B&B.

Their long-term goal is to convert the village into holiday homes. It's a marathon project, particularly as they're doing the renovations themselves. So far they have cleared the surrounding land and the barns, and have nearly finished work on their own

property. "We've no idea how long it will take; it could be five years, it could be 20," says Mapley. "The biggest challenge is roofing. There's no point doing any other work on the houses until the roofs are watertight and, at £10,000 each, that's beyond our reach at the moment."

DAY TO DAY, the couple are financing themselves by working on landscaping in surrounding villages – and are happy to report that they have received a warm welcome from the locals. "The French have been incredibly friendly and welcoming," says Mapley.

Their new life has not been without its challenges, however: the double whammy of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine has meant building materials have doubled in cost, and their first winter in rural France was occasionally dispiriting.

"Some days there have been tears of frustration, but never once did we think we've done the wrong thing," says Ward. "We may be short on money," adds Mapley, "but we're not short on energy or commitment."

KATHRYN KNIGHT



AMBITIOUS
Paul Mapley and Yip Ward now own the hamlet of La Busliere