

Clockwise from top left: the guest rooms offer spectacular views of the grounds; original features add to the charm of the hotel; Clive takes an active role in tending to the landscaped garden; a dining experience with a difference

ABBHEY *ever after*

Five years ago, Clive and Tanith Cummings nervously unveiled their new project: a 12th-century Cistercian abbey in the Burgundy countryside that they had converted into a luxury hotel.

It had been a long time coming. Clive had been managing his parents' luxury hotel, Amberley Castle in Sussex, and his idea had been to re-create the spirit of Amberley in deepest Burgundy. On an exploratory visit in 2005, Clive and his parents instantly fell in love with La Bussière-sur-Ouche's Cistercian abbey that is only a stone's throw from the Canal de Bourgogne, about 20 minutes' drive west of Dijon. "As soon as we drove through the gates we thought

When Clive Cummings saw the beautiful 12th-century Abbaye de la Bussière, it was love at first sight. Today, he and his family have transformed the historic abbey into a beautiful hotel, deep in the Burgundian countryside

WORDS: MARY NOVAKOVICH

it's got to be. This is the place," Clive says. "The deal was signed within about eight hours."

While Tanith stayed at home in Sussex with the couple's four children, Clive was getting to grips with the place. The French Catholic church had been using the abbey as a spiritual retreat, which Clive kept running as it was for the initial few months. Tanith and the children arrived in August 2005, giving

them a couple of months in which to get settled before the work began on the major refurbishments that were needed to turn the austere and rather unpleasant dorm-like rooms into luxury accommodation. The hotel officially opened to the public in April 2006.

The original 10 bedrooms from five years ago have expanded to 18, all impressively and sumptuously styled. The abbey's original vaulted ceilings are intact, and there are some wonderful stained-glass windows that run down most of the length of the building. The bedrooms are comfortable and elegant, with rococo furnishings offset by the sleek modern bathrooms. Everything is set in a tranquil 15-acre park, with a lake ▶

Below: Lewis, Tanith, Clive, Max, Bethany and Georgia Cummings and their dogs Corton and Holstein

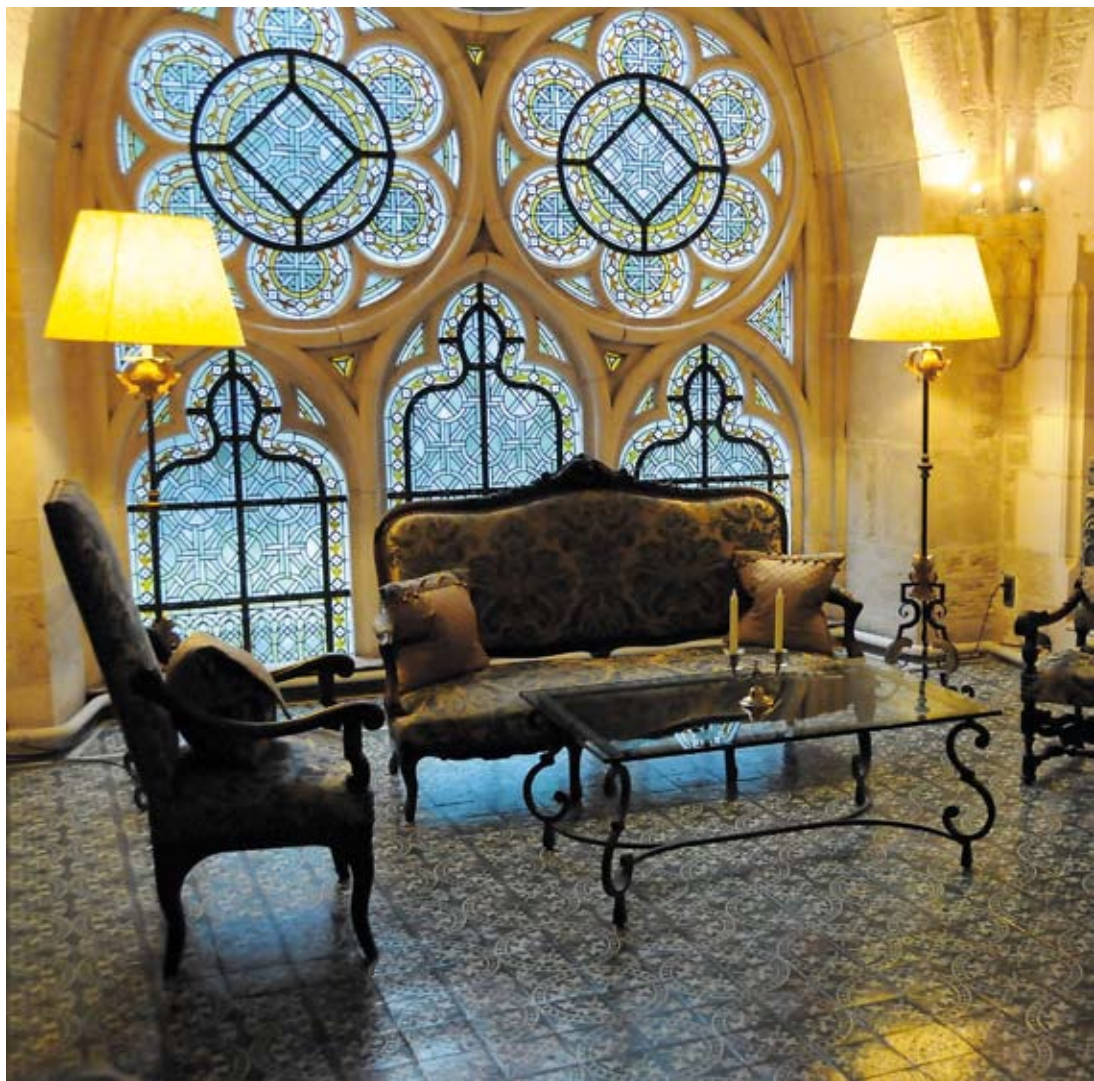


that is straight out of *Swallows and Amazons*. Numerous paths wind through patches of woodland and alongside some of the park's venerable structures, many of which date from the abbey's inception in 1131. A watermill greets the visitor just inside the main gates, followed by the kitchen garden, the Cummings' residence, the hermitage, the crypt, the abbey itself (including its Renaissance additions), and ending with the magnificent structure that is the monks' old *pressoir* with its original historic wine press.

"We've created an English country house hotel but with a French restaurant and French ambiance and French attitude towards food and service," says Clive. "When we first came we looked at what Raymond Blanc did at *Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons* – a Frenchman taking a little bit of France to England. We thought we'd bring a little bit of England to France. I thought the French wouldn't go for bangers and mash and roast beef so made the decision to play it safe on the menus."

This decision is what has made the hotel a must-see stop for wine lovers travelling along Burgundy wine routes, cyclists on the Canal de Bourgogne, and visitors from around the world who want time to stand still for a moment while they enjoy fine cuisine in agreeable surroundings. There is an informal bistro as well as the gastronomic restaurant, which was awarded a Michelin star within a year of its opening. The hotel was also accepted early on into the prestigious *Relais & Châteaux* group of hotels. The original head chef, Olivier Elzer, has since left but the former sous chef, Emmanuel Hébrard, was promoted and easily retained the Michelin star. The food is exquisite, focusing on local produce such as Bresse chicken, Morvan ham and delicious Burgundian cheeses.

The Cummings knew they had a top class restaurant right from the start, even if the beginnings were less than auspicious. Clive recalls: "Our first nights here, literally we had two nights with no one. I was sitting there thinking, what are we doing? And then our local doctor



"I thought if we could do what my parents do in England, we'd be all right but it's not the same market at all. It's more international: families and groups"

Above: the beautiful stained-glass windows
Right: Clive and Tanith have brought the abbey back to life by transforming it into a luxury hotel

phoned up and booked a table for four. It just flowed from there."

They also realised early on that there are major differences between running a country house hotel in France and in England. "At first I thought that if we could do what my parents did in England and do it here, we'd be all right. But it's not the same market at all," says Clive. "It's more international, tourists on bicycle trips, lots of family and group trips. Amberley Castle is a typical English country house hotel: Londoners going for a weekend away, dress code in the restaurant, no dogs, no kids, no groups, all the staff in black tie. But here is a totally different market.

The French are so much more relaxed. They do want to come out with the kids at lunch. They bring their pets. Families come out as a whole. The less you dress up the more respected you are."

Clive has certainly embraced that last concept. Five years ago he was almost always seen wearing a suit, coming from a family business that required a jacket and tie in the restaurant. Now he's wearing chinos and a casual shirt, some garden mud sticking to his boots and designer stubble on his face. I reminded him of my last visit, when he was wearing a suit and tie while posing stiffly for photographs. "Was I?" he says, looking a bit surprised. "That's very English. I can't stand wearing a suit now." Later that evening in the restaurant, although he is in a suit while greeting guests, his shirt is open at the neck and there's no hint of a tie.

Another sign of their assimilation ▶





is their growing ability with the French language. When they arrived in 2005, Tanith had only schoolgirl French, and Clive's crash course in the language wasn't much use at the time. Now, he says, "we are more competent now on the phone, and I can follow conversations better. You don't realise how much French you've learnt. I can sit down with my bank manager now. I can hear accents. I speak a lot more French to the staff." Tanith adds, "we know enough to get by."

It's a very different story for their four children: Bethany, 16, Lewis, 15, Georgia, 10, and Max, eight, all of whom are now fluent French speakers. When they arrived back in 2005, they enjoyed the

"When the children arrived, they loved the novelty of having a whole park to themselves. They were boating, riding their bikes... It was wonderful"

novelty of having a whole park to themselves. "The kids loved it," Tanith told me at the time. "They were boating on the lake, riding their bikes, climbing up trees – they thought it was wonderful. They didn't once say they wanted to go home." They settled easily into their schools, particularly the two younger children. As Bethany and Lewis grew older, Tanith thought that international schools were better suited to the children's needs.

"Bethany is doing her

Above, clockwise from top left: antique furniture adds to the grandeur of the bedrooms; Burgundy is renowned for its fine wine; Clive with his son Lewis and their dog Corton

international GCSE in Aix-en-Provence at the moment," explains Tanith. "But Lewis is already back in England because he's really sporty and he's not getting the opportunity here to fulfil that side of things. The younger two are slightly different because they started their school life in France. You would class them as bilingual whereas Bethany and Lewis are just fluent." Tanith prefers the French system up to secondary school age. "Up till then, I think the education is really good. They're taught discipline and respect for their teachers which I think England lacks a lot. They're used to being in a small school so they're with any age of child and they're used to



playing together. So that side of things is really good.”

Both she and Clive admit that they miss England because of the children. “But after a couple of days of being back there you think, I want to go back to France,” says Clive. “We really love where we live,” adds Tanith.

It’s hard to believe that their project almost didn’t get off the ground. Back in 2005, some locals opposed the purchase because the abbey’s park that was once public was going to be in private hands.

But the opposition died down when people realised that the Cummings were rescuing a valuable piece of Burgundy’s history.

Then there was the important fact

Above, clockwise from top left: the abbey is set on 15 acres of beautiful parkland; the entrance to the hotel; the Abbaye’s replica of Paul Day’s striking sculpture at St Pancras station

that there were plenty of staff jobs going to French people, and it wasn’t long before the restaurants became popular with their neighbours.

Now Clive and Tanith have plans for expansion, although it might take some time before they have the funds for extra bedrooms and facilities. The old watermill by the entrance gates is earmarked for a spa, and the monks’ *pressoir* would make a superb cookery school. “Having 32 to 36 bedrooms and those added amenities means that you can start making packages for three, four or five nights over the winter months,” explains Clive. “Once we get more rooms we go into the next bracket, and that’s when you

start to make money. Once that happens you sit back and let it grow, let it mature.”

The hotel’s friendly, highly efficient and multilingual staff means that Tanith can fit her administrative duties around the children. Clive takes an active role in looking after the gardens, their dogs Corton and Holstein rarely away from his side. Clive also deals with the vagaries of French bureaucracy, which can be awkward when running a business set in a 12th-century building.

Clive and Tanith take in their stride the huge responsibility of keeping the abbey’s heritage alive. As Clive says with a smile: “She’s a beauty, but she’s a beast as well.” **LF**
www.abbaye-dela-bussiere.com