

It really isn't that long ago that the Sun was yelling "Up yours, Delors!" from the top of its front page. Yes, Britain had once again asserted its independence from the rest of Europe – and our southern neighbours, France, in particular.

But our apparent animosity towards the French goes back further than that – much further, in fact. In the early years of the 18th century, when the idea of a Great Britain was first floated, many prominent writers suggested that a British – or at the very least English – identity is achieved by not being French. So, without the French to look down on, the newly minted Briton might have had a far greater struggle to define itself – and its John Bull character – so clearly.

Indeed, when writing his *Dictionary of the English Language* – which really doubles as a manual on how to be English, Samuel Johnson had the model of the French dictionary to aim at. What Johnson didn't have, though, was the resources of the French Academy, instead beavering away in a poky London garret with several "harmless drudges", as he called them, in an attempt to solidify the English language.

Not that the good Doctor saw the marked difference in human resources as a drawback, mind you. Instead, it was something to be proud of. When reminded that it had taken 40 French academics 40 years to produce their dictionary, Johnson replied: "Forty times forty is sixteen hundred. As three to sixteen hundred, so is the proportion of an Englishman to a Frenchman."

How times have changed, even since the Sun suggested Jacques Delors file his European ideas somewhere not especially comfortable. Nowadays, us Brits are not only buying up French property at an increasing rate – 51,000 properties purchased since 2000 – more of us want to follow in the footsteps of the 100,000 Brits who now live permanently on the other side of the Channel.

And this is by no means the end of the affair, if the results of a recent ICM survey are anything to go by: Twenty-two per cent of those under 50 years of age surveyed said they'd rather forget all about their British status and become French instead, and 37 per cent claimed to want to retire to *l'Hexagone*.

The only part of France to have lost out in our affections is the wine, apparently, with American plonk now glugged in slightly greater quantities here than the vin.

So what does this outbreak of Francophilia mean for the British buyer of French property? That you can simply snap up a cheeky Breton home, barrel into your new neighbourhood and assume that the neighbours will be falling over themselves to make friends with you? Oh no, there's a little more to it than that.

After all, this is a country that can be up in



## NEIGHBOURS: UN PETIT PROBLEME?

arms at the drop of a beret. Take, for example, *Les Rosbifs* – as we are sometimes affectionately known, sometimes not – buying so many French properties that in some areas house prices have rocketed straight through the spending ceiling of your average Frenchman.

No wonder, you might think, that there's the odd outbreak of protest against the ever-advancing tide of British homebuyers washing into France. Just two years ago, in Bourbricq, Brittany, slogans such as '*Anglais integers, oui. Colons, non!*' (English who integrate, yes. Colonisation, no!) were daubed on buildings as locals vented their spleen at the house invaders from across the Channel.

So, as with every aspect of buying French property, there's a right way and a wrong way to approach the art of getting on with one's French neighbours. But what is the right way to go about this, and when should you start?

### Start as you mean to go on

With their layer upon layer of local character, it's easy to fall in love with a French property, but how you get on with your neighbours matters as much as your *new pigeonnier* or *oeils de boeuf*. In other words, buying the property is one thing, but what happens after the ink has dried on the contract is another thing completely – and both are equally important if you are to realise your



YES, THE JONESES ARE CHALLENGING NEIGHBOURS, BUT SOON YOU MAY HAVE THE PETITS, DURANDS, GERARDS AND BLANCS TO CONTEND WITH INSTEAD. **PAUL BEASLEY** ASKED BRITS WHO'VE ADAPTED TO LIFE IN FRANCE HOW FRENCH NEIGHBOURS LIKE THEIR *ROSSIFS*

French property dreams.

This is certainly the view of Normandy property agent and resident Philippa Weitz: "Everyone impresses upon us the importance of getting on with the neighbours, and they are right. I know personally when I bought my house that I did nothing other than to think, in a rather tunnel-visioned way, about buying the house but the day the house is bought you step off a precipice into a new world."

So what advice does Weitz have for those thinking of following in her footsteps?

"In my house-selling role I try to encourage people to think before buying about the specific area they want to be in and to start to make

friends and acquaintances immediately. Best of all, before signing any paperwork, try and meet the neighbours to make sure they are not the neighbours from hell. As body language is the same in both languages, you'll know soon enough if you are welcome, or not."

When you have completed the purchase, you obviously don't want your first contact with your new neighbours to involve them shaking their fist at you because your renovation works have had a potentially catastrophic effect on their home.

This is exactly what happened to Alex Charles of Crème-de-Languedoc. Charles bought a ruin in the Languedoc village of Cessenon and wrote a

note to all his immediate neighbours telling them about the works that would be carried out apologising for any inconvenience caused.

As part of the renovations, an internal wall had to be removed and surrounding walls lowered. Planning permission had been granted and an architect had been employed. "I had assumed that the architect that had drawn up the plans had at least considered the consequences of this work", says Charles, "but I was soon to learn that you never assume anything!"

Initially, Charles recalls, the work went well and the roof was soon removed along with the internal wall, but the next morning he was awoken by one of the builders "banging on the door to inform me that 'the neighbour's house was falling down!'"

Charles rushed to the site, to find a huge crack in the balcony of the neighbour's house, owned by a Monsieur Rousseau – who Charles had not yet met. But the crack wasn't all: "You could actually hear the mortar falling like sand out of the wall. Stones were literally falling out of the wall."

At this point, a "somewhat agitated" M Rousseau appeared at the balcony. "Now my French was not great at the time – but I got the general gist of what he was shouting", Charles recalls all too clearly.

Thankfully, though, disaster was averted, and the wall not only remained standing but ended up far more secure than before.

And what of the initially shaky relations between Charles and his agitated neighbour?

"Relations have since improved and we have become good neighbours – he has even brought us gifts of his homemade *eau-de-vie*."

Despite the happy ending, unsurprisingly Charles doesn't "recommend that you meet your neighbours in this way".

So whether you have walls to knock down or bridges to build, best start the process of integration before you swing the sledgehammer in earnest.

Says Weitz, "It is important as soon as you arrive to take conscious measures to become part of the community. In this way you will show the other members of your neighbourhood that you are interested in them and want to be friends."

She continues, "Often we Brits buy in country areas, and traditionally country folk are more traditional, so that's another barrier to overcome. Some will speak some English, others none at all."

But, then again, you might not speak any French, so how you structure that all-important first meeting could be crucial? In this situation, Weitz suggests, there are many things you can do to overcome the embarrassing and awkward moments: "Think about who you are going to