



Sarah Francis founded Sifex in 1989

Down memory lane

After 30 years of selling châteaux and other prestigious French properties through her company Sifex, **Sarah Francis** looks back at some of her most memorable sales.

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Over the years, we have sold too many châteaux to count, some more than once, and one without a viewing! These listed are just a few of my favourites (a dry run for the book I must write one day), but I shall never forget the excitement of my first château sale, a pretty 17th/19th-century château in Bagen, complete with chapel and facing the foothills of the Pyrénées.

It was bought by a Scottish businessman for whom I think the setting was reminiscent of the Highlands. It transpired he had grown up in a Scottish castle and was heir to one of Scotland's most famous clans. The Château de Bagen is now a *chambres d'hôtes* so, who knows, perhaps one day I will return there!

From India, with love

Inevitably, the procedure of buying a French château has altered dramatically over time with the arrival of, first the fax, and then the internet. The speed with which one can showcase properties worldwide has transformed the industry. High-net-worth buyers can respond instantly from the other side of the world the minute they see something matching their dream.

I was taken by surprise, one Monday morning in 1998, by an unscheduled visit from a charming young Englishman, over from Mumbai, where he managed a high street bank. He wanted to buy a château and needed advice on what to see on his forthcoming trip.

A few weeks later, I had a visit from his American fiancée, waiting for me to pick her up from the nearest Métro station. I found her, sporting a smart gold lamé jacket, cowboy boots and drinking a can of Coke with a straw. We went through an amusing encounter during which she banged the table in *When Harry met Sally* fashion saying, "We have GOT to see this" over and over again. In the event, they did and bought the amazing Château Robert, with an 18th-century façade on one side and a dramatic 20th-century Italianate façade with double-revolution staircase on the other. They made a successful business renting it to Hollywood stars, including Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem.



Hollywood stars have stayed at Château de Robert



Château de Bagen has exceptionally pretty gardens in a charming setting



Château de Marquein was completed in 1554

“My first château sale was to a Scottish businessman for whom I think the Pyrénées setting was reminiscent of the Highlands”

Perfection in the Pyrénées

One of my favourite applicants was a charming merchant banker, who called one Saturday afternoon through an advertisement in *Country Life*. His wife was French from Béarn and he was looking for a château near Dax. For several years, I phoned every six months in case he had bought something and kept looking for him.

One day, an agent from Gers sent me a faded colour copy of Château d'Astis, an elegant, classical château, not in the favoured territory but in Pyrénées-Atlantiques, north of Pau. I stared at it, musing that this could be 'the one' if only it were near Dax. I phoned in any case and my charming gentleman exclaimed: "How extraordinary! We have just widened our area of search to include Pau. So yes, we could be interested after all."

They visited the château, absolutely loved it, bought it and were very happy there for many years. Many kind referrals followed and a lovely invitation to lunch, to see what they had done to the château (which included a confessionary as a bar – he was enormous fun!). I was even invited to a drinks party at the Mayfair offices of the bank to thank me for having found him his dream château and introduce me to all his colleagues. An exceptional experience!



The classically French forms of Château d'Astis delighted Sarah's clients

Over the moon

In the days when initial contact was in person or by phone, it was easier to ensure that agents received the relevant contact details and the proof of financial viability that is so vital in château transactions. Property owners quite naturally like to know who they are dealing with, and with strict money laundering regulations in place, transparency is more and more relevant in today's fast-moving world.

A briefcase full of notes at the *notaire's* office is no longer an advantage. Evidence of the origin of funds is a pre-requisite. A 'cash buyer' on the other hand, who can transfer funds directly from a bank, rather than depending on the sale of a property or recourse to a mortgage, is at a great advantage as, frankly, obtaining finance for châteaux in recent years has become all but impossible.

In 2002, an American couple from New Jersey set off for France in a distinct hurry to buy a château, provided they could find what they liked. Arrangements were made for them to meet our Paris correspondent who produced, with a flourish, photographs of an amazing neo-Gothic pearl, the Château de Challain-la-Potherie. Built in 1847 by René Hodé, it's often referred to as *le petit Chambord*.

Highly excited, they set off at once, visited it, fell completely in love, agreed a price and bought it. Ever since, they have been running a very successful wedding business. Designed to commemorate the passage of time, Challain has four towers for each season, 12 turrets for each lunar month, 26 spiral staircases for each fortnight in a year, 32 fireplaces for the weeks in a year and 365 windows for each day.



Le Mas de Montet was snapped up by Brits

On the market



€2.09m: Exceptional château in Pyrénées-Atlantiques, once the home of the uncle of musketeer D'Artagnan; set in almost 14 hectares of parkland with 10 bedrooms, snooker room, seminar room, guest cottage, pool and stunning mountain views



€2.2m: Romantic 16th-century riverside castle with lake, guest cottage and outbuildings in an idyllic setting in Corrèze; beautifully restored and only 10 mins from a village, 25 mins from Brive airport, 90 mins from Bergerac and two hours from Bordeaux.



€2.75m: Immaculate château in Gers, built in 1815 and available in excellent turnkey condition; about 900m² luxurious accommodation in walled grounds with long cedar drive, tennis court, pool and outbuildings including a chapel and cottage.



€2.8m: Authentic listed Monument Historique in Dordogne, between Périgueux and Limoges; tastefully restored preserving original period features; manageable size with stables, gîte, outbuildings and fenced deer park in 73 hectares of countryside.



€3.25m: Exceptional listed 13-bed castle in the Pays d'Auge of Calvados near the famous seaside resort of Deauville (casino, racecourse, golf); 11 hectares including gorgeous gardens; seven bathrooms, guest houses, orangerie and large garage.

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Two business ideas!

The Château le Mas de Montet in Charente was another success story that year, snapped up by two British buyers, a management consultant and an osteopath. They completely renovated it and successfully transformed it into a luxurious hotel restaurant. Before they arrived, former president François Mitterand, a near neighbour, used to wander through the grounds. In 2008, they had a change of career in mind and sold it.

Over in Burgundy, the Château Hotel d'Arc-en-Barrois was sold twice by Sifex. The same indomitable agent from Dordogne crossed France numerous times on both occasions to secure the sale – something I will never forget! It was bought first by a Dutch shipping magnate in 2002 and then in 2010 by Danish clients wanting to create a 'wellness centre' for fellow Danes.

Renaissance beauty

Another we sold twice was the impressive Renaissance Château de Marquein, set in the timeless countryside of Lauragais but less than an hour from the modern city of Toulouse. At a remarkable 26m high with 1.4m-thick walls and a striking steep-pitched tiled roof (a style more familiar in Burgundy), the castle has two crenelated and two conical towers with panoramic views of the Pyrénées.

Bearing the date 1539, it was completed in 1554. One could imagine the difficulties of its construction in the troubled feudal period with warring lords. In those days, the very fine wide spiral staircase with shallow steps was used to take horses bearing possessions to the safety of the upper floors. The large windows, typical of the Renaissance, flood the rooms with light.

No pain, no gain

In early 2008, a day spent visiting châteaux in Normandy started badly when, with a camera in either hand, I stepped onto a large flagstone to admire the view and found myself landing squarely on my wrists, attempting to save my cameras. The cameras survived, but as the day



Château de Blavou is in the heart of the Normandie Perche regional park

wore on, my wrists were less happy and by the time we reached the Château de Blavou, the last of the five châteaux, the snow was falling steadily and I couldn't turn the door handle!

However, it all ended well as in due course we sold the first and the last of the properties – no gain without pain as the saying goes!

Food for thought?

Equally impressive was the sale of the beautiful Rhone valley Château de Beauregard to a highly organised businessman who viewed it on a day trip, complete with driver from the airport to ensure he could view the château, which he then bought, and also enjoy a good lunch at Châteauneuf-du-Pape before returning to the UK. I had visited Beauregard from the outside in a quest to measure the gateway for some Middle Eastern applicants, but had been thwarted by the very French sight of a carefully positioned white *camionette*, parked slap in the middle of the avenue of plane trees leading to

the château, rendering any approach futile. The driver was blissfully unaware, beret firmly pulled down over the eyes and feet protruding from the window!

Loved from afar

Of the many sales that have made a lasting impression, this last one was special because I had been fascinated by the property for many years from the previous time it had been listed. A magnificent 15th-century château in Corrèze, La Grenerie has everything: lakes, towers and turrets galore plus a 200-hectare estate. This stunning property was finally sold to a serial entrepreneur from the other side of the pond after a love affair that lasted seven years. ■

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La Grenerie boasts many fairytale features, including soaring medieval turrets



The very grand Château de Beauregard