

Franco Files

Charting the *Cummings* family's exquisite transformation of Abbaye de la Bussière.

It seems almost destiny that in 2005, the English Cummings family would acquire a 12th-century abbey in the heart of Burgundy, transforming it into a magnificent country house hotel. Indeed, it was founded in 1131 by another Englishman, Stephen Harding, a Cistercian monk from Sherborne, Dorset.

Nestling in 17 acres in the luxuriant Ouche Valley between Dijon and Beaune, the abbey was home to some 300 Cistercian monks at its apogee, towards the end of the 13th-century. The number of monks declined in the 16th-century with the Wars of Religion and then at the time of the French Revolution the monks were ousted and the abbey sold in auction. In the 19th-century, the abbey was bought by the baron Léonce Hély d'Oissel, a banker and politician, who commissioned its renovation, adding elaborate frescos and gothic galleries and it became known as the Château de la Bussière. It was inherited by one of his daughters, the Marquise de Ségur, who without children, donated the abbey in 1921 to the Archbishop of Dijon, to become a place for spiritual retreats.

Joy and Martin Cummings began their long journey in the hospitality business in 1977. Martin had joined the Royal Navy as a boy entrant at the age of 15 and left in 1969 to join the John Lewis Partnership on a Management Training Scheme. Over the next eight years, he worked his way up and became an AGM at Waitrose. Meanwhile Joy trained in catering. Armed with this experience, they

acquired their first pub, the King's Arms Inn, part of the Whitbread group, at Cookham-on-Thames. This was followed with the acquisition of The Inn on the Lake in Godalming in 1982, where they won two national hotel awards and then in May 1988, with the help of a sizeable bank loan, they were able to buy Amberley Castle in West Sussex, at the time a private home.

With their passion for history and hospitality and their eye for design, Joy and Martin set about renovating the castle. This was quite an endeavour and they faced a good deal of adversity, including the financial crisis not long after the purchase and then, in 1994, a fire destroyed the castle's kitchen. This might have been ruinous had it not been for Joy and Martin's sheer grit and determination and work ethic. They set up a kitchen in a Portakabin in the car park while the main kitchen was being rebuilt. Essentially, they always put the money back into the business and continued refurbishing the castle and transforming the grounds, eventually home also to a luxury tree house.

During those early years, one of Joy and Martin's four children, Clive, who was training to become a chef at Westminster College in London, started helping in the business. After a day at college, he would come home, roll up his sleeves and help Martin with mixing concrete to build bedrooms. In 1998, Clive and his wife Tanith, who he had met when she began working part-



Above:
Lovingly restored by the Cummings, the abbey is a designated national, historical monument.

Left:
A stunning spiral staircase.

Opposite:
View of the abbey across the lake.

time as a waitress at the castle and who married at the castle, became the managers. Over the years, Amberley Castle would become an award-winning, luxury country house hotel, joining the Relais & Châteaux group and gaining worldwide renown. Notable among the awards was being voted into The World's top 20 Leisure Hotels by readers of *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine for two consecutive years in 2000 and 2001.

In 2005, the Cummings began looking for a sister property and, being ardent francophiles, France seemed like the obvious place to start. This is where their destiny joined that of Abbaye de la Bussière. Initially, they came to visit the Château de Loizerolle, 7kms away from the abbey, and signed a purchase contract. However, the family selling the chateau were not all in agreement and the sale appeared to fall through. Convinced that it would never happen, the Cummings began to look elsewhere and were put on to Abbaye de la Bussière, just down the road and even more magnificent than the chateau. The abbey had been on the market for some time as it had become too much of a financial burden for the Archbishop of Dijon and the association running it. It was love at first sight for the Cummings, who followed the Archbishop in convoy to Dijon and signed the purchase contract there and then.

It was two years later, in 2007, that the Cummings would learn that the Château de Loizerolle was theirs if

they still wanted it. They did indeed. As luck would have it, this coincided with someone wishing to purchase Amberley Castle, so the sale was completed and Joy and Martin were able to move to France. They lived at the abbey for nearly three years whilst renovating the chateau, which would become their home.

This would become a remarkable episode in the history of the two sites, since Stephen Harding and his fellow monks had first established themselves at Loizerolle in the 12th-century. Following a fire that destroyed much of Loizerolle, the monks came down the valley to found Abbaye de la Bussière, alongside the Ouche river. It was only the third time in the history of the abbey and the chateau that the two sites were united: the first time by the monks, the second by the Hély d'Oissel family and then the Cummings family.

Back to 2005 and following the acquisition of the abbey, Clive moved out to France and settled into a cottage in the abbey's park. Tanith and their four children joined him at the start of the school summer holidays. So began a new challenge; to plan the transformation of the abbey into a country house hotel, to set up the new business, to settle the children, then aged ten, eight, four and two, into French schools, to mention just a few things. All this whilst not speaking a word of French. ▶

Renovation work proper began in September 2005, as the Cummings had made a commitment to the Archbishop of Dijon that the abbey would be kept open as was until that time, in order to respect previous reservations for spiritual retreats. It was a massive undertaking, beginning with dredging the lake, from which some 350 lorry loads of silt were removed, which proved to be ideal for laying the foundations of new, beautifully manicured lawns. Then came the installation of a proper sanitation system, the redoing of all the plumbing and electrics, demolishing the former monks' cells to create new, luxurious bedrooms with Jacuzzi bathrooms and intensive cleaning of the interior greying paint work, which produced a wonderful surprise in the discovery of the old frescos. All this alongside and under the very watchful eye of Bâtiments de France, since the abbey is a national, historical monument.

The original business plan included opening with 20 bedrooms, but financial constraints meant that the abbey opened in April 2006 with ten bedrooms, along with a gastronomic restaurant in the former refectory and a bistrot in the former monks' kitchen.

By 2007, the abbey had become a member of the Relais & Châteaux group and the gastronomic

restaurant had gained a Michelin star. In the same year, it gained two tourism awards in Burgundy and, in 2008, won the prestigious accolade of Andrew Harper Hideaway of the Year. Since then, it has been voted among *Condé Nast Traveler's* Best Hotels of the World and listed in the *Daily Telegraph Travel's* 50 Best Hotels in the World.

Never people to rest on their laurels, the Cummings have continued to reinvest any hard-earned profits into the business. Today, the abbey counts 20 bedrooms, among which are two new duplex suites, created in the house Clive, Tanith and the family had made their home. They moved to a smaller cottage in the grounds of the abbey.

Forever flowing with innovative ideas, Clive and Tanith plan to renovate the old watermill to create some 10 additional bedrooms, create a spa area with swimming pool and develop both a cooking and wine school. Indeed already, in the 13th-century monks' cellars, wines are being aged in barrels by a local wine producer; a testament to the Cistercian monks' know-how, since the wines age fabulously.

The consecrated crypt in the park has been carefully preserved, providing the most wonderful, intimate and spiritual spot for weddings.



The family ponies graze in the landscaped gardens.



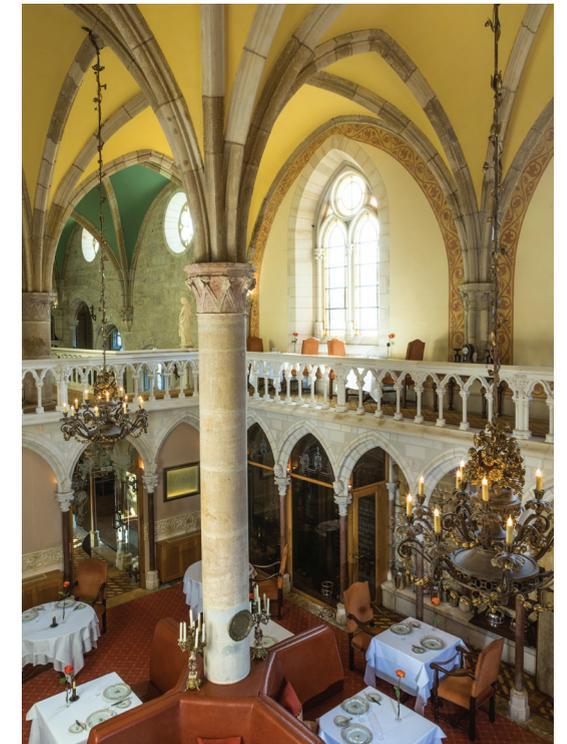
Above:
Sympathetic renovations have created one of the world's most revered destinations.

Left:
A room with a breathtaking view.

The Cummings continue to develop the abbey with a true respect for history, tradition and nature, in keeping with its Cistercian founders. In 2015, they installed three beehives, allowing the abbey to produce its own honey. The organic vegetable and herb gardens are forever being cultivated and, last year, shrimps were reintroduced into the waters below the dovecot and in the lake. So natural and peaceful are the surroundings that the ducks and geese abide in perfect harmony in and around the lake and it's a lovely sight to see the coypu families emerging from the lake to nibble on the lawns. Clive and Tanith's two ponies add to the serenity, to be seen grazing around the grounds.

The abbey is indeed a haven of peace and tranquillity, set in beautiful grounds in the heart of Burgundy, between Dijon and Beaune. As such, it is the ideal place either for a peaceful rest on the way to the Côte d'Azur or the Alps, or just for a destination in itself, perfect for discovering the famous vineyards of Burgundy, now a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The monks have long gone, but Abbaye de la Bussière retains a feeling of peace and tranquillity, hard to find in this modern world.



Discover gastronomic delights in the Michelin star restaurant, Le 1131.