

Never a dull day

Dealing week in, week out with French craftsmen who take pride in their work is a joy for architect **Neil Vesma**

MONDAY

Out this afternoon at the workshop of the Feltre brothers, two third-generation carpenters who are building an entire oak-framed roof on the ground before dismantling it and taking it to site, where it will grace the bedroom tower of Peter and Lin's stone house in the Dordogne. Many clients bemoan the slowness of the builders here, but when one sees the care and attention to detail that Bruno and Raymond have lavished on their work, one starts to understand why it takes time. From the selection of the oak, through the complex jointing of this four-sided frame, the adzed finishes and the beautifully-stopped chamfers, everything has been taken into account, and everything has been done just so.

Bruno and Raymond Feltre are modest men, but they're also very proud of this piece of their work. Usually I won't see them from one month to the next, but this last week they were in twice to suggest I call in to view the frame, so I knew something was up. And I was really glad I went, they were clucking round their roof like two happy hens around their chicks, explaining how they'd pegged this dragon tie like this, that kingpost like that, too reserved to actually say that they only wanted someone to say Wow! I'm impressed! So I did. In French, of course.



Seeing top quality craftsmanship, such as this oak-framed roof being built by local carpenters the Feltre brothers, is one of the best parts of Neil's work

TUESDAY

Readers may remember Serge the hairy French eco-consultant, whose total lack of English, strong local accent, unequalled speed of delivery and lip-reading-proof facial hair renders two thirds of what he says unintelligible. Panic! He's got a throat infection and can only whisper now! Our lunch today was in an eardrum-bursting echoing salle in a hotel-restaurant near Rocamadour in the Lot (five-course Menu du Jour plus wine and coffee, €12 a pop) and my level of comprehension nosedived.

In the end our trip was entirely wasted, but not for that reason. That's a story for another day: a story of Greed, a story of Passion and, above all, a story of Heavily Discounted Floor Tiles.

WEDNESDAY

Last time I talked about the windmills that dot our landscape, today it's a pigeonier I'm measuring. These pigeon lofts are usually attached to a barn or house, and are traditionally built in stone or occasionally half-timbered, a tower 4 or 5 metres square under a steeply-sloping tiled roof. Originally the pigeons were

of value not only for their eggs and meat, but also for the - you know - fertiliser. The guano. The walls were lined with shelves of nests in the form of shallow but heavy clay bowls, the better to avoid unnecessary guano loss. These days pigeoniers add value in other ways: some form of tower can add 15-20% to the value of the same house without one. Pigeonnier extensions are very popular, to the extent where in some protected landscapes new ones are now forbidden due to the sheer number of poorly-proportioned towers that have sprung up to blot the

landscape in recent years. While the French planning system is generally laissez-faire compared to the UK, if you are within 500 metres of a Listed Building, or in a conservation area or other protected zone, one has to beware. The Architectes des Bâtiments de France or ABF is the body charged with protecting our visual heritage, and they can be just as capricious and pig-headed as the most highly-trained English jobsworth. They also have the right in certain cases to extend the period for deciding a Planning application from two to seven months. Fortunately the officers involved are most often architects themselves, and do have an appreciation of the need to balance heritage with buildability and budget constraints. I find the best way of dealing with them is to drive the 90 minutes necessary to their offices and run through my clients' ideas face to face. As ever, France is a country where people talk, and



A 'pigeonnier' or tower can add 15-20% onto the value of a property

the concepts of Libert , Egalit  and Fraternit  are not just something carved in stone over the door to the Mairie, but are often strongest in the people where one would least expect to find them. It's part of why I love it so much here.

THURSDAY

Talking to a client today about getting rid of an electricity pole in their garden. You know the sort I mean, dirty grey

waffle-sided concrete, very tall. You see them everywhere. Farmers use them for bridging streams and shoring up their barns. Kestrels, being cliff dwellers by nature, roost on the ledges near the top. The EDF seems to have an inexhaustible supply of them, dropped in small piles by the roadside anywhere as long as it's unsightly and/or in the way. They then forget about them for 17 years and nobody else can shift them as

they're not theirs and they're too heavy to move and too full of rusty iron bars to break up. Anyway. As I was saying, The client wants it removed, which involves putting the cable underground. This will take several weeks of phone calls and a couple of site meetings to get a quote from the EDF, which then has to be paid in full before they will programme in the work. Not being at the cutting edge of customer service, they will take ages before they actually do anything (for one couple, two years and counting!). Statistics prove that in 93.627778% of cases the owner has already forgotten about his pole's existence by the time the blue vans show up, as it has just blended in to the background, same as everywhere else. These poles were introduced after the war as a cheap way of electrifying rural areas, and like old soldiers they never die, they just fade away.

FRIDAY

Knackered.

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