



# LETTER FROM FRANCE / COURRIER DE FRANCE

January 2015

Hello Everyone / *Bonjour à tous !*

It was my intention when I first started to send my 'Letters from France' to try to do this on a monthly basis. But I'm afraid that this past autumn has defeated me! You'll see in a moment that we have been very much occupied with the major project to develop the loft of our house, including the need to move twice. Now that the New Year is with us, I would like to make a resolution to return to my monthly rhythm.

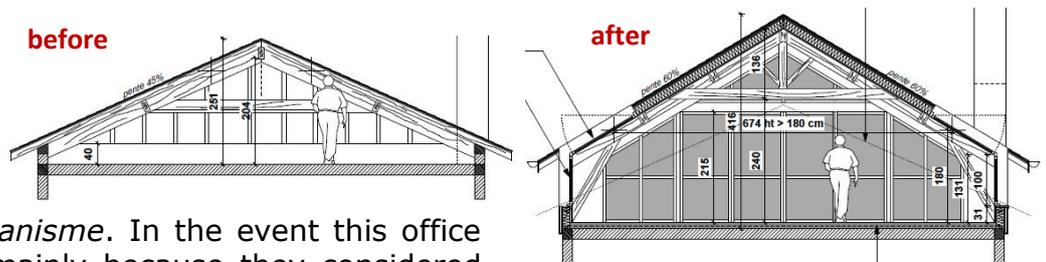
When Douglas and I bought our house here in *Gerde* in 2005, we were charmed by a neighbourhood on top of a law called *Castet* just to the north of the village centre. We were particularly attracted by the spectacular views of the mountains and the surrounding countryside. However, over the years the outlook from our house has become somewhat obscured by trees and other houses. We therefore thought to develop our loft by raising the roof, quite literally, so as to have access to this view, and coincidentally to use the space more profitably. This is obviously a far from trivial project, and we enlisted the services of a master of works (*maître d'œuvres*), who in turn was able to recommend an architect. I first introduced this topic to you back in March 2014, and I am delighted to say that we are finally making excellent progress. I imagine that



This wonderful photo of Gerde and the Vallée de l'Adour was taken by David Bourdeau. Do visit his website (<http://m.tete-en-ciel.com/>).

many of you will have tackled similar projects, and so may be interested in our experiences in a relatively remote part of France.

The old loft (or *grenier*) was useful for storage, but only allowed someone to walk upright in a small central section, and was accessible by a pull-down ladder. Our architect proposed several options, and the first we chose was duly signed by the mayor of *Gerde* (each small community (*commune*) in France has its own locally elected mayor and municipal council) and then submitted in February 2014 to the French equivalent of the Scottish Building Control, a function fulfilled by the *Ministère Chargé de l'Urbanisme*. In the event this office declined the application mainly because they considered that the proposed design would not fit in with the style of buildings in our mountain valley. We were informed of their decision within three weeks. A modified set of the architect's drawings was then submitted a week later with the style you see above, with a typical pitched roof very traditional and practical. We received the *permis de construire* from our mayor four weeks later, and we were favourably impressed by this relatively efficient process. In retrospect we are glad that we have ended up with this design. It is perhaps relevant to



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mention that the set of architect's drawings comprised 11 pages, but show for example, nothing like the sort of detail of plumbing and electrical work required in Scotland. The local building control is more concerned about style than about building regulations which are dealt with by the training and licencing of the tradesmen (*artisans*). It would be very rare for building projects which require a *permis de construire* to be tackled by DIY enthusiasts.

The building work finally got under way at the end of October, after various delays caused by the weather and other uncontrollable factors. The photo on the left shows the front of our house on a lovely sunny autumn day with the scaffolding just being erected. The right-hand photo was taken on a rather dreich day just before Christmas, and you can see that we were already weather tight with our new slate roof and Velux windows. We had deliberately chosen a design to try to keep the original appearance and style of the building intact, and are pleased with the outcome. The modified house is one 1.2 metres (about 4 feet) higher than the original.



So, where are we now? Well, all of the interior lining of the new 'loft' has been done, the floor laid, and much of the electrical work installed, as you can see in the photo. We searched for a suitable name for this marvellous airy open space, and have decided to call it the 'Refuge' which has the connotations locally of a welcoming mountain bothy and a safe haven. A local musician Edmond Duplan has composed a much-loved song called 'Le Refuge'. You can listen to it on this You Tube link, and also enjoy some fine mountain scenery:

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjphA1yQzyg> )



We still need a stairway (the ladder is not all that easy for me!), and this is promised for later this week. Then there will be the installation of fitted furniture around the perimeter of the Refuge, as well as a small kitchen area because we plan to have our breakfasts in this new space. And no doubt that there will be the occasional glass of wine with nibbles too!

I should mention too that we have a balcony just outside the doors at one end of the Refuge which fulfils our dreams of giving us an uninterrupted view of the *Pic du Midi de Bigorre*, one of the highest mountains in the

*Hautes Pyrénées*. Needless to say, we have taken lots of photos – it is a breathtaking outlook. Here is a recent one taken on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January. The *Pic* is a bit right of centre, and there is an observatory on the top – but that is another story.

Greetings to all / *Amitiés à tous!*

Linda.

Together with Douglas, Maddy and Magnus (our cat)...

