

# Making room

Increasing the size of your living space needn't mean disruption, dust and knocking down walls, as **Vicky Leigh** enjoys finding out



From loft conversions to extensions, there's no shortage of options available when it comes to adding extra living space to your home. However, if budget doesn't allow, there's another option which could provide the perfect solution if you're willing to think outside of the box – and of the house.

Riverside Shepherd Huts is based on the Worcestershire/Warwickshire border and is owned by Jean Richmond and her partner David Phillips. The couple have more than 30 years' experience in the manufacture of agricultural and industrial steel-framed buildings, but when business began to slow down they spotted an opportunity to diversify.

"A friend of ours has an original shepherd's hut that he has restored, and when we saw it in his field we thought how lovely it was," says Jean. "Business was quiet, so we thought we'd try making one using a steel frame rather than the traditional wooden one. We thought it would be nice for us to have, but that there might also be the potential for us to sell it as well."

They were right. In September 2011 the couple took the hut along to the agricultural show in Moreton-in-Marsh, along with a children's version that Jean had convinced David to make, and they were a big hit. Catching many eyes and capturing many imaginations, they received their first order in March 2012 and they've been coming in ever since then.

"Initially we wondered what we were doing wrong, because there was so much interest at the show but then nobody was buying them," says Jean. "But then when the first order came through in the following March we realised that people had to go away and think about it. They're suddenly given the option to have another room and do exactly what they want with it, and it can be a bit overwhelming."

Since then the business has really taken off and Jean and David have recently built hut

## "All we had to do when it arrived was make the beds!"

It was quite by chance that one of Jean and David's shepherd's huts came to be in France. Keen to add extra living accommodation to their French home, Maria and William Harley liked the idea of a gypsy caravan in the garden, but were disappointed by the reality of how much space it could offer. However, as luck would have it, they spotted a shepherd's hut and realised they'd found just what they were looking for.

The Harleys purchased their property near Béziers 10 years ago. Maria was familiar with the Côte d'Azur as a result of many childhood holidays, but as this part of the country was out of their price range a friend suggested they consider Languedoc-Roussillon.

"In addition to the cost factor we also felt that the Côte d'Azur was too busy for us," says Maria. "Living in London we really didn't want to swap one traffic jam for another, even if it was in the

sunshine! A friend of ours who knew this area suggested we come and look here, so we did and we fell in love with it."

### A CHANGE OF PLAN

Maria and William originally intended to buy an old farmhouse or a traditional *maison de maître*, but instead became the new owners of a more modern villa that needed some work.

"The house is entirely the opposite of what we intended to buy," says Maria, "but we were completely won over by the view. Located on the edge of a village it looked out onto beautiful vineyards and also had a nice garden. It was in liveable condition but wasn't to our taste and everything was very tired, so we had to redecorate and update the bathroom."

Since then the couple have enjoyed spending time at their second home, and their children

have been frequent visitors too. However, with the arrival of grandchildren it became a bit of a tight squeeze, so they began to consider how they might add an extra bedroom to the house to accommodate the whole family.

"The garden is lovely so we didn't want to encroach on it by extending the house, so we decided to look at alternative options," Maria explains. "We went to see Jean and David because they were looking after a gypsy caravan that was for sale, and although we thought it was beautiful we were very disappointed by how small it was."

It was then that they happened to spot the shepherd's hut and asked Jean if they could have a look inside.

"We loved the product and the finish and it just seemed ideal for us as a way to add space, and it was a much cheaper option than building





*The huts are fully insulated so are ideal for year-round use, and as they are bespoke they can be used in a variety of ways*



## Everyone is different and likes different things, and that's the great thing about the huts. We build them to each individual customer's requirements

number 41. One client has recently bought three huts to add to their 'glamping' site in order to extend the season, while home offices are also proving to be particularly popular.

The frames for the huts are made in Alcester, and then Jean and David finish them off at home in Hanbury in a workshop at the end of their garden. Customers can choose exactly what they want to have inside the hut, from bathrooms to handmade kitchens, and can also choose the interior décor.

"Everyone is different and likes different things, and that's the great thing about the huts," says Jean. "We build them to each

individual customer's requirements, so whether someone wants a craft room, a home office or rental accommodation, a hut can work for them all. They're fully insulated so they're perfect for year-round use too."

The huts are a great way to add an extra room to a house without calling in the builders, and they look like part of the house too. There are no compromises to be made in terms of the fittings or the finish, and as they can range in size from 10ft up to 18ft they're certainly not short of space either.

"People are always amazed at just how much you can fit into a hut and they still don't feel

cluttered," says Jean. "They feel a bit like a Tardis because there's so much room in there and there's plenty of headspace too, so you don't feel confined. We had someone who was 7ft 2in in one last week!"

Two of Jean and David's shepherd's huts have even made it all the way across the Channel, where they have found new homes in Poitou-Charentes and Languedoc-Roussillon with two British couples. In addition to focusing on the UK market, Jean is now keen to promote the huts in France as well and hopes that they'll take off in the same way.

"Everyone likes the huts because they're 'cute'," Jean comments. "I always say that I've got the best job in the world because people walk into one and they just start smiling." ■

[www.riversideshepherdhuts.co.uk](http://www.riversideshepherdhuts.co.uk)

another bedroom too," says Maria.

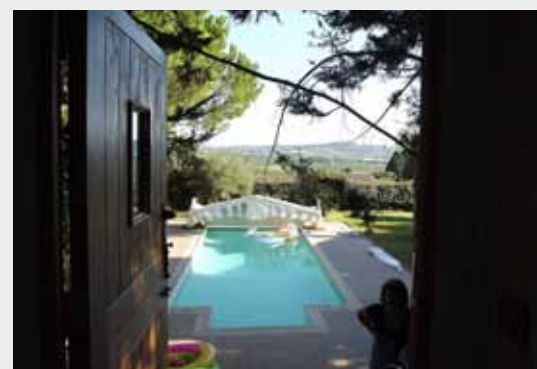
The couple only needed an additional bedroom as the bathroom in the house could be accessed easily from the garden, so opted to have a double bed and two bunks in the hut, along with a small area with a fridge and facilities to make hot drinks.

"All we had to do when it arrived was make the beds!" laughs Maria. "We love how attractive it looks in the garden, and the way it nestles among the pine trees in our garden. It makes a lovely feature, and when the house is full and we need an additional room it's very nice to have the extra space."

Both Maria and William retired this year and now hope to spend longer periods of time at their home in France. And with such charming accommodation on offer, friends and family are sure to be queuing up to join them too.



*Maria and William now have the extra space they need to accommodate the whole family, and are looking forward to spending more time in France*





Adrian and Micha will use their shepherd's hut to add to the choice of holiday accommodation they are able to offer their guests



We'd always thought that the huts were great fun. We'll probably end up staying in our hut ourselves if we let out all the other accommodation!



## "We wanted to do something different"

Adrian and Micha Ward have spent most of their holidays sailing, and have kept a boat in France for many years. When they decided to invest in a property in France it therefore needed to be close to Rochefort, where their boat is now moored. Looking towards semi-retirement and not wanting to stop working completely, they also wanted the property to provide them with an interest. As a result they bought a property in July 2012 that had plenty of potential for a gîte business, situated close to Civray in the Vienne department of Poitou-Charentes.

### FUTURE PERFECT

"We wanted to do something different, and this house provided the potential for us to do that," explains Adrian. "The idea is that it will give us an interest, because if you've run a business all your life as I have you don't just want to stop and do nothing. This gives us a purpose and a project, which I really enjoy, and then we have the rental potential once we've finished."

For the time being, Adrian and Micha are travelling backwards and forwards between France and the UK, but the plan is to spend the greater part of their time at their French home and they're working towards this for next year. They have already given the main *maison de*

*maître*-style house a makeover by reinstating some of the traditional features, which had been removed by a previous owner, and are currently in the process of finishing the barn conversion.

"The idea is to have three gîtes, which we will rent out along with rooms in the main house. Our aim is to offer visitors a choice when it comes to the type of accommodation they want to stay in. The *maison de maître* will be rather grand, and then the gîtes will range from traditional cottage-style to something a bit more modern."

And that's where the shepherds' huts come into this story. Adrian and Micha were also keen to offer an 'outdoor living' option, which they hoped would appeal to families who liked the idea of camping but were less keen on the idea of shared campsite facilities. They had already seen a shepherd's hut and thought it would fit the bill, and their four acres of land with orchard provided the perfect setting.

### A FRENCH TWIST

As luck would have it, they then came across Jean and David at a show in Malvern. "We chatted to them about the hut and explained that we would want take it across to France," says Adrian. "They said that wouldn't be a problem as they were happy to lend us their trailer, so we bought their display model. Taking it through the Tunnel was a

little challenging and it certainly tested us a bit!"

There were a few raised eyebrows and questioning looks when they reached the Tunnel, but after being waved through by officials they were on their way. Adrian and Micha hope to have all of their accommodation ready for the rental market next year. They intend to create an outside seating area and gazebo near the hut, and if their first one proves to be popular they hope to add a couple more in the future.

In addition to the attraction of the shepherd's hut, Adrian and Micha's house is easily accessible thanks to the numerous travel options on their doorstep, which can only add to the property's appeal to holidaymakers who are looking for accommodation. They are just 35 minutes from Poitiers, which has an airport and a high-speed TGV rail link from Paris to Bordeaux, while Limoges, La Rochelle and Bergerac are also within easy reach.

"We'd always thought that the huts were great fun, and they have a more romantic feel to them too," says Adrian. "They also provide very useful extra space if you've got a small house, as they give visiting family and friends a bit of privacy and they don't feel like they're in your way. We'll probably end up staying in the hut ourselves if we let out all of the accommodation!"