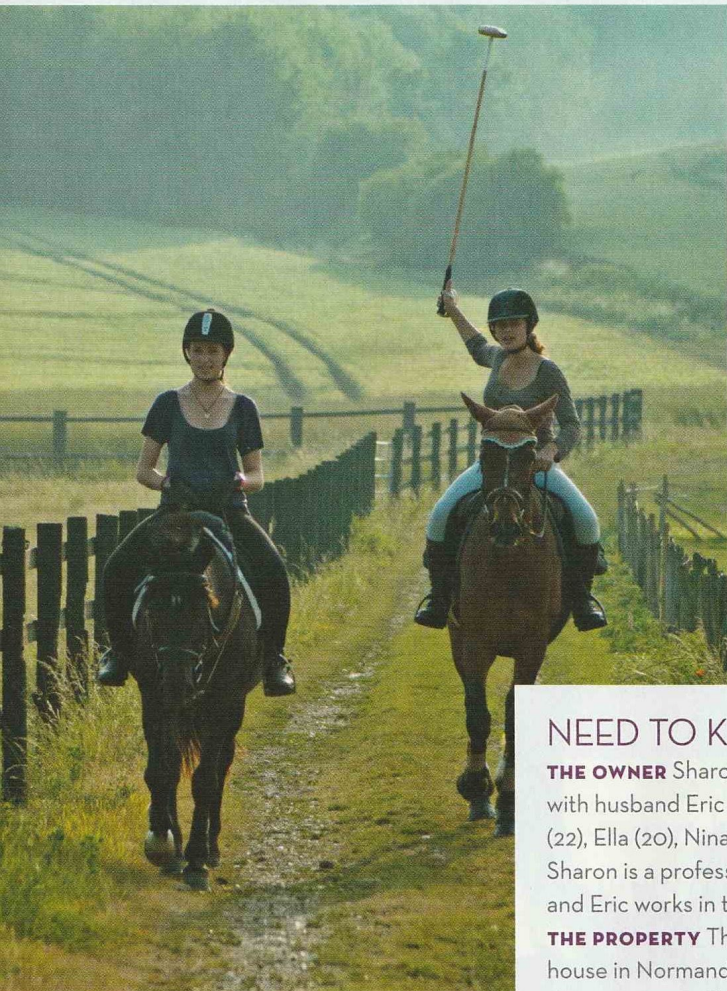




The move of a **LIFETIME**

Sharon Santoni left England over 20 years ago and has since created a beautiful home for her family in rural Normandy

FEATURE **JACKY HOBBS** PHOTOGRAPHS **MICHELLE GARRETT**



NEED TO KNOW

THE OWNER Sharon Santoni lives here with husband Eric and children Victor (22), Ella (20), Nina (18) and Jim (16). Sharon is a professional *brocanteur* and Eric works in the food industry.

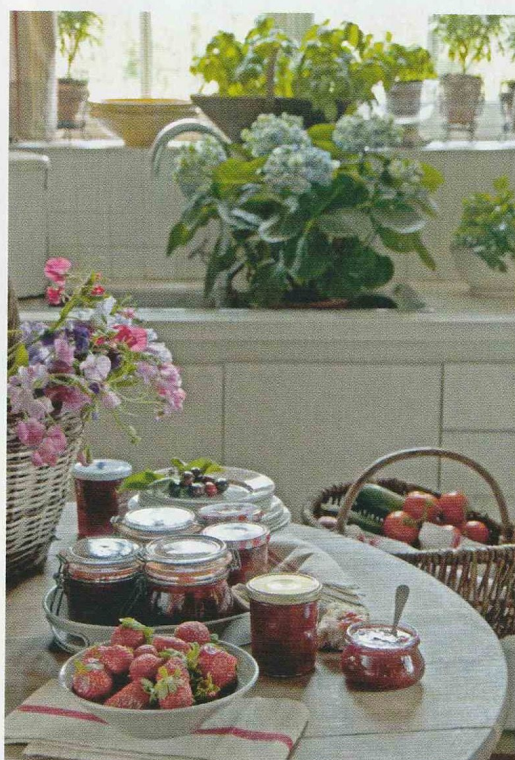
THE PROPERTY This late 19th-century house in Normandy has a living room, dining room and kitchen on the ground floor and five bedrooms upstairs.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Ella and Nina enjoy riding in the countryside; Sharon's cherry clafoutis is wrapped in a vintage tea cloth; Sharon in her garden with a wheelbarrow full of vintage linens; Sharon sells some of her *brocante* finds from her barn **FACING PAGE** The house is festooned with roses and wisteria



The newly created
outdoor dining space
is ideal for al fresco
entertaining





'After 18 months Sharon had achieved her goal of creating a "welcoming, comfortable and elegant" family home'

When Sharon Santoni left England to study French on the Côte d'Azur in the 1980s she didn't look back. She met husband Eric and wanderlust took the couple, and their growing family, to Paris, India and finally to this fabulous 19th-century house in the Normandy countryside. 'We wanted our four children – Victor, Ella, Nina and Jim – to grow up with the space and freedom of the outdoors,' says Sharon.

Before the Santonis moved in 14 years ago, the property had served as the weekend home of an eccentric French admiral and his family. 'When we viewed the house it was filled with zebra skins, deer antlers and hunting spears,' says Sharon. 'It was eclectic to say the least. Generally though, it was all in good order and the ramshackle barns had so much potential. Plus, the garden spilled out on to the open countryside.'

The couple needed to rewire throughout and replace an archaic waste system, but little else required immediate attention. So, after 18 months, Sharon had achieved her goal of creating a 'welcoming, comfortable and elegant' family home. 'What I love most about it is the fact that it feels very cosy but there's still enough space for everyone to have their own room.'

Sharon has amassed several collections over the years, which are showcased throughout. Among her favourites are china, linen and paintings – which have been mainly bought from local *brocantes*. 'I've been drawn to *brocantes* since my ➤



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Sharon sets the table with transfer-printed French plates; the couple make jam using strawberries picked from the garden; a picture frame makes an effective garden display teamed with roses; fitted cupboards showcase books and curios in the living room. The coffee table is a painted *brocante* find



'I always come away from the brocantes with something irresistible or unexpected. I don't go for anything too precious – it's just not realistic with a family and dogs'



student days,' she says. 'I always come away with something irresistible or unexpected. I don't go for anything too precious – it's just not realistic with a family and dogs.'

A few years ago Sharon began blogging about her *brocante* trips and her readers quickly started asking if she could take them along with her. She now hosts shopping tours of local fairs. 'It's a lot of fun,' she admits. 'The most charming people come along, which is just as well as we spend long, hard-working days together. Shopping in this way is so exciting because you never know what you're going to come across next.' ■

Visit Sharon's blog at myfrenchcountryhome.blogspot.com

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Sharon has hand-painted a delicate floral pattern on to the plum walls of the master bedroom; Sharon's extensive textile collection includes beautifully hand-stitched garments and monogrammed bed linens; an old armchair has been covered in vintage toile; fresh flowers add colour to the entrance hall

SHARON'S FAVOURITE PIECES

1 'Years ago Eric and I went shopping, determined to find a table and chairs for our first flat but returned with this glorious c1930s-40s **painting** (p93) instead. These lovely ladies have lived with us ever since!'

2 'Recently I found a beautiful painting decorating a small **tambourine** (p96). I've since discovered that it was painted by an artist called Joseph Ripert.'

3 'I made the rose-printed garden chair **cushions** (p96) using scraps of fabric left over from my grandmother's curtains. We use them all the time.'

The guest bedroom is located in the eaves of the house. Sharon refurbished the bed (bought from a *brocante*), stripping it back before repainting and upholstering using a vintage monogrammed linen



A closer look

COLLECTING VINTAGE LINEN

'I have a huge collection of vintage bed linen,' says Sharon. 'The texture is unmatched by modern bedding - I love the weight, the feel, the colours, the distinctive scent and the fact that nothing like it will be made again. In the 19th century the looms were too small to make sheets large enough to cover a bed, so each householder would stitch two pieces together with a fine seam. Often they would

embroider a monogram either side of the seam. If you find a sheet with monograms at the outer edges, this is where a worn sheet will have been unpicked, rotated so that the monogram no longer falls in the middle and then restitched to prolong its life.' Find vintage linen at Sharon's web shop (myfrenchcountrybrocante.com) or Beyond France (beyondfrance.co.uk).



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Sharon sits outside the rose-clad entrance to her home; this tambourine is one of Sharon's favourite possessions; the pretty floral chair cushions are made from old curtains that belonged to Sharon's grandmother. 'I have photos of me as a toddler sitting in front of them,' says Sharon



GET THE LOOK



- 1 'Azzurra' chandelier, £415, The Chandelier & Mirror Company
- 2 Toile cushion, £15, Dobbies
- 3 Wedgwood 'Asiatic Pheasant' bowl, £16, China Search
- 4 'The Pompadour' fireplace, £1,794, Chesney's
- 5 Triple red stripe grain sack, £50, Beyond France
- 6 Three aged zinc planters, £60, Cox & Cox

❖ For stockist information see page 137