



A HOUSE FOR ALL SEASONS

Henri-Charles and Natasha Hermans transformed a rundown farmhouse into a beautiful family villa

Words: ANNE PHILLIPS Photos: GUY OBIJN

THE PROPERTY

LOCATION

Antwerp, Belgium

BUILDING

Renovated farmhouse, built in the 1890s

ROOMS

Hall, sitting room, study, kitchen, utility room, 4 bedrooms (3 en suite), dressing room

MOVED IN 2002

COST £250,000

RENOVATION

COSTS

£250,000

VALUE

Circa £1 million

'WE BECAME
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STRAIGHTAWAY'





Out in the Belgian countryside, on the outskirts of Antwerp, stands the pretty home of Henri-Charles Hermans and his wife Natasha. Ask them why they moved away from the city to live here and they'll point at the lovely green landscape all around them. 'I grew up in the country, and then moved to the city,' says Natasha. 'But it began to feel claustrophobic with all the noise – not to mention the traffic jams when I did the school run. As a result, we both said, "Let's move to the country."'

But even after they found their house, it was another three years before they could actually live in it. 'We became attached to the house straightaway, although it was a wreck. There was no gas, no water, the electrics were dodgy and the garden was a jungle – it needed everything doing to it,' says Natasha. 'It took us two years to obtain planning permission, then the renovation took another year.'

'Believe it or not, I didn't mind all the waiting as I was sure it would turn out beautifully,' she adds. 'We'd come and work on the house every Sunday, and the children Henri-Jean, 14, Nelson, 11, and Alexandre, 6, would happily play in the garden. For lunch we'd simply have a picnic.'

The original 1890s farmhouse consisted of a kitchen and a small living room, while the only bedroom was on a mezzanine over the cellar, and the attic was unused. Henri-Charles used his skills as an interior architect to redefine the spaces. Although the outside walls were untouched, some interior walls were moved and the vast attic area was also fully exploited. Henri-Charles also deals in antiques and renovates and builds furniture in his ►



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1 The very long table was made from old boards and is the focal point of the kitchen. 'The boys love to do their homework at the table,' says Natasha. Henri-Charles made the chairs. The stainless steel range cooker from Lacanche (01202 733011) adds a modern touch

2 An old French table and driftwood mirror add character to the hall. The reclaimed church flagstone tiles are typically Belgian



THE OWNERS

Henri-Charles and Natasha Hermans and their sons Henri-Jean, Nelson and Alexandre

OCCUPATION

Henri-Charles is an interior architect

FAVOURITE ROOM

'The living room is wonderful,' says Henri-Charles, 'especially in the winter when we have an open fire. But the kitchen is the heart of the house.'



1 & 2 An elm coffee table in the sitting room is large enough to complement the impressive fireplace. Distinctive Country Furniture (01935 424858) can custom-make reclaimed elm coffee tables. The mahogany wall cabinet is an Italian antique

3, 4 & 5 The fireplace in the study is a 19th-century French antique. For similar Victorian table lamps, try Stiffkey Lamp Shop (01328 830460). A walnut desk with a French oak chair makes for a traditional working area, while a more eclectic touch is added by Henri-Charles's polyhedrons



own workshop in England 'because British craftsmanship is superior to Belgian,' he says.

Having to wait before they could start work on the house had its own advantages. It gave him extra time to source exactly the right materials for his home: a period fireplace, old doors and parquet flooring. 'We've tried to keep everything in the style of the original house,' he says. The result is charming. Where possible, the original beams and floors have

been preserved. What was once the stable block is now a huge sitting room.

In the hall, the original floor, which had been laid straight onto the soil, was replaced by old church flagstones. The large, light kitchen is a real family room, with a vast oak table and a modern range cooker and oak units. 'It's like a private showroom,' says Natasha. 'Henri-Charles specialises in bespoke oak kitchens, and people often come to see what we've done.' A

wide wooden staircase leads upstairs, where there are four beautifully appointed bedrooms. The parents' bedroom is wonderfully peaceful, in pale colours, with nothing but a few black-and-white photographs for decoration.

All over the house, carefully chosen antiques and quirky finds from reclamation yards and junk shops have been combined to give the home a very personal character. Wooden architects' scale models – a special interest of ►

'I KNEW IT WOULD TURN OUT BEAUTIFULLY'



1 Situated in the beamed attic area, the master bedroom is an oasis of calm. Sheer simplicity is Natasha and Henri-Charles' trademark with a few framed black-and-white photos and a plaster bust among the room's minimal accessories. The reclaimed parquet flooring used here and elsewhere in the house features strongly. Lassco Flooring (020 7394 2101) specialise in reclaimed flooring, including parquet floors

2 & 3 The master en suite is too sleek to hide behind a door and has an arched entrance. The bath and washbasins have hardstone surrounds and the mirrors hide bathroom cabinets

Henri-Charles, who did most of the work on the house himself – are displayed around the house. A collection of polyhedrons that he has been amassing for around 20 years takes pride of place in the study.

Bit by bit, the house is becoming exactly how the couple envisaged it in their original plans. 'Some important details are still missing,'

laughs Natasha. 'Door handles, for instance! But apart from that, it's perfect.'

Apart from the lack of door handles, they have other, more ambitious plans for the future. They want to renovate the outbuildings and the garage, and turn them into offices and a showroom for Henri-Charles's business. If it all goes to plan, this project should be

finished by next year, and the couple can't wait to have everything in one place. In the meantime, Henri-Charles is constantly on his travels – partly for work and partly in pursuit of antiques and renovation materials. It's a busy life he leads but it is made all the more bearable by knowing that at the end of his journeys he has a beautiful home to come back to. **BH**



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STYLE SECRETS

The Hermans have created an understated country feel in their home. Here are some **design ideas** for achieving a similar look

STORAGE

Hide away clutter with this White Chest; from £59 for two drawers, to £229 for a nine-drawer chest, JoJo (0870 241 0560).



BATHWARE

Simplicity makes for style with this sleek washbasin bench from the Laxan range, £109, Ikea (0845 3551141).



KITCHENS

Go for clean wooden lines in the kitchen with the Canella kitchen range, which includes this four-drawer console, £400, from Habitat (0845 601 0740).

