

Heather Cottage the second

Alec Fry

My Norwegian wife Erna and I moved to our first Heather Cottage in 1977. Actually, it wasn't called Heather Cottage then - it was 'In Harmony'. Sadly, the owner's wife had run off with the heating engineer, which ended the marital harmony and resulted in the sale. So we thought that a change of name would be wise.

With its five acres of heath-like garden and a view of heather filled common opposite, the name suggested itself, and 'Heather Cottage' was duly registered with the district council. Happily, we lived there (in harmony!) for 28 years; I am a keen member of the CGS, and used to delight in raising my annual seed selection in the greenhouse. In 2000 we even established a millennium wood, supported by a woodland grant. But then we were suddenly struck by an inexplicable wander lust. So we sold up, bought a similarly rural farmhouse in mid-France, and packed everything into the removal van. That even included my treasured classic Ferguson MF35 tractor, which I drove rather nervously up the steep ramp and into the van behind our furniture.

Sadly, France didn't live up to expectations. It was bitterly cold that winter, when the eastern winds did their worst; and we soon learned that 'rural' in France means living among the country's biggest and noisiest industry - large-scale agriculture - and being surrounded by villages which somehow always look deserted.

Two years later we moved on, ever southwards to a mountain side in Spain. This was more like it: a panoramic view of the coast (right across to Africa, when the

visibility was good), year-round sun and a subtropical (if overgrown) garden. We grew spectacular bougainvilleas, and delicious oranges, lemons, pomegranates, almonds, figs, avocado, nispero, grapes, prickly pear and more. The only problem was that all of these needed frequent attention and daily watering, and they grew on a near 45° rocky slope. Gardening was a scratchy scramble at best. The winter climate was fabulous, but



we usually came back to good old England for a mid-summer escape from the worst of the summer heat. It was a good life on the whole, even if the ever-changing bureaucracy and lack of forward planning got us down at times. But it was the inevitable call of the grandchildren that really drew us back after five years of poolside bliss.

Tom (our son) and Claire had bought a run-down cottage completely surrounded by National Trust common land. They enjoyed common rights, and rose to the challenge of rebuilding what was a totally neglected house (think 99-year-old batchelor!). Both of them had responsible jobs, and they found themselves struggling to combine project management, commuting to London, very active and time-consuming interests (triathlons and Ironmen!), and bringing up two demanding young children. Grandad and grandma just had to help out, but that meant finding a new home within easy reach of their remote cottage.

The task proved far from easy as only a handful of properties within a ten-mile radius were on the market. Most of those were too expensive, too small, too far from the new family, situated near busy roads, or had virtually no garden. Eventually one came up which looked promising. Situated overlooking the South Downs at the back, and opening straight on to a huge nature reserve at the front (over which, incidentally, the owners enjoyed common rights), the position just couldn't be bettered. The stunning location easily outweighed the general shortage of space, lack of any garage and the unbelievably overgrown garden. When we arrived to view, we couldn't believe that the sign said 'Heather Cottage'! What's more, the lady who answered the door announced herself as 'Mrs Fry' and inside we found a cat reclining on the bed which was completely identical to the pampered Siamese-cross who had flown back with us from Spain, courtesy of Monarch.

With such omens, how could we turn down such a place? After an unexpectedly prolonged purchasing process due to the complex legalities of living along an unnamed track in such a location, we finally moved, in October 2012, into Heather Cottage the second.

Tackling its overgrown cottage garden is a story in itself. For instance, it was many weeks before we scythed a path to the far end, 330ft from the house, where we unexpectedly found steps leading down to a clear stream - truly a lost garden. And then there's the enjoyment which we discovered from being commoners, and continuing a proud tradition dating back to well before the establishment of our Parliament. Maybe I will find time for that episode later...

Alec gardens in the Sussex Weald. He wins a garden gift token for my favourite article in this issue. We look forward to the sequel! Ed.