

British property owners in France

What makes a success or a failure of their venture?

A dissertation submitted by

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“I hereby declare that the dissertation submitted is wholly the work of Catherine Spriggs. Any other contributors or sources have either been referenced in the prescribed manner or are listed in the acknowledgements together with the nature and scope of their contribution.”

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Abstract

“Buying a property in France” has become the aspiration of many British households over the last twenty five years. Particularly sensitive to the rural charm and the pace of life on the other side of the English Channel, people tend to seldom think through certain aspects of the venture before the actual purchase. As a result, the decision of buying ‘that farmhouse with 7 acres of land’ or ‘that dilapidated old barn’, might very well turn out to be a success, but on the other hand, may just as easily end up in tears. The aim of this dissertation was to discover the reasons for these occurrences in order to avoid disappointment and increase future owners’ chances for success.

Due to the lack of records from French authorities, the locating of past and current owners proved to be difficult at first, however, it was eventually possible to acquire good quality data, once contact was made. The research results revealed a great variety of reasons as to why people purchased a property in France, with the majority intending to move there permanently at some stage. Surprisingly, culture did not appear to be a significant problem, however, the absence of knowledge of the French language and the lack of financial planning were found to be the main culprits for the failing of the “dream”.

The recommendations made in the conclusion highlight the importance of taking more time in selecting the ‘right’ area and making sure expectations are likely to be met. They also aim to equip potential buyers with the basic necessities required on arrival, in order to secure a good relationship with local communities. Whether these recommendations are implemented or not will of course be up to the individual, however, they could save a lot of grief which others before have had to endure.

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1.0 Introduction

France has always been an important destination for British tourists, largely due to the many landscapes the country has to offer, its strong culinary image and its attractive climate. More significantly over the last two decades, many of these tourists have developed a desire to return year after year as if they were drawn by a magnet. France has become a “dream” land in the eyes of many British householders, leading to some purchasing a property in France in pursuit of that dream. Between 1987 and 1989, the number of French properties purchased by Britons increased from 2000 to 14000, eventually reaching today’s figure of over 500000 (The Times, 2000).

However, buying a home in France does not always meet the expectations which originally prompted the purchase and the grass does not always prove to be greener on the other side of the English Channel. For the likes of Peter Mayle, the whole venture is a success whereas for others, it is a disaster. The activities and circumstances of each case appear to contribute greatly towards the outcome of this foreign ownership.

1.1 Rationale

Why someone decides to buy a property in a different country to his own and where they decide to live, are manifestations of a whole range of influences varying from their personal health to the social and financial conditions of their surroundings. As disenchantment and dissatisfaction set in amongst a number of Britons, more and more people are looking towards a better environment and a happier life in France, failing to fully appreciate the reality of the “world” they seek. They are often guided by the memory of an enjoyable holiday, totally unaware of the difficulties associated with the material ties to a foreign country such as France. Amongst the multitude of books and television programmes promoting the benefits of living abroad, it is possible to find the occasional warning and advice required when dealing with financial and administrative matters. However, there does not seem to be any literature about the considerations which should be made before contemplating such an important step. Yet, the experiences of British people who have bought properties in the past could be of immense value to those who are thinking about doing the same. The consequence of

buying without prior knowledge is often the need to return to the familiar causing the unnecessary failure of “the dream”. The combined success of previous owners and their relevant characteristics should strengthen that knowledge which would otherwise be gained after problems have already occurred .

This dissertation examines the motivations leading to the purchase of properties in France by the British in relation to the success rate of the whole venture. It is also concerned about the critical factors which make it a success for some and a failure for others.

1.2 Objectives

The aim of this thesis is to examine the motivations and characteristics of previous purchasers and draw salient conclusions from past experiences. It will provide a comprehensive report which will enable the readers to increase their chances of success should they be considering the purchase of a property in France. The research goals are:

1. To identify the primary reasons why British citizens buy properties in France and attempt to map them to the demographic profile of the purchaser.
2. To examine the proportion of French speakers prior to the purchase and monitor their language skills progress.
3. To identify whether the involvement of British property owners in local French activities bears any relation to the success of their venture.
4. To identify the contributing factors to the failure of the project as perceived by the British purchaser.

1.3 Conclusion

The study will begin with a literature review of the academic work already available on the subject in order to identify the areas of primary research necessary for the realisation of the project. A methodology chapter will explain the research techniques used for the acquisition of the data along with the difficulties encountered during the collection process. The results of our findings will finally be presented and discussed with a view to recommend a set of actions prior to the purchase of a property in France by British people.

2.0 Buying a property in France - The British Dream versus Reality

2.1 Introduction

The growing number of British property owners in France has been the subject of much media attention over the last 30 years. It has also generated some interest from academic researchers who have demonstrated that the overlap and the relationships between tourism and migration would make an ideal starting point for further research (Williams and Hall, 2000). Mobility and ease of communication has meant that crossing the English Channel is often quicker than commuting within the United Kingdom, which has in turn, made it more difficult to establish the boundaries between tourism and migration. By definition, the word tourism implies the intention of returning home and the purpose of not taking up permanent residence (Williams *et al.* 2000). When describing migration on the other hand, it is generally assumed that there is some permanence associated to it, although in pure academic terms, it can be argued that no migration is classed as permanent until the migrant has actually died abroad. In view of these definitions' issues, the aim of the review is to discern permanent levels of residency amongst British property owners in France and identify their possible link with the reason for the purchase of the property.

2.2 The second home purchase phenomenon

2.2.1 The history of a trend

Looking back in time, it might be fair to say that the "tradition" of owning a second home in Britain has been slower than in the rest of Europe, largely due to urbanisation, the loss of rural assets and an economic state which prevented the demand. However, the relatively quick modernisation of society has left most people with a feeling of nostalgia for past lifestyles and landscape. People's interests and social habits started to change, displaying greater awareness of the environment, favouring more outdoor activities and feeling the need to escape the pressures of city life. Already conscious of those social changes, Downing and Dower (1973), were stating:

..... property overseas, both old and new, must be seen as a large potential source of supply of second homes for Britons, particularly at the upper end of the income/education scale.

As a result of all this, new forms of tourism emerged, some of which have centred on particular types of rural destinations such as French countryside. In addition, a second home in the Dordogne and Perigord was often viewed as a sound capital investment for the British (Clout 1977). These factors have in turn influenced life style migration, of both the employed and the retired. The flight from modernity was further identified by Buller and Hoggart (1994) as one of the key influences on the migration from the United Kingdom to France. During the second part of the last century, most developed societies like Britain have seen a shift in fundamental values which can sometimes be associated with post-modernism. The search for treasured rural environments where a town is still a town; country, country; and where the horse plough is not yet a thing of the past (Burns, 1994) has contributed to the growth of new forms of tourism destinations such as the Dordogne and Tuscany (Williams *et al.* 2000).

However, it is only in the 1980s that the British buyers became major players in the French housing market. According to Le Monde (1990), the number of French properties purchased by Britons rose from 2000 in 1987 to 4000 in 1988 and 14000 in 1989. The most recent French population census (INSEE, 2001) indicates that over 200000 Britons owned a property in France in 1999. This last figure, however, is no higher than De Warren and Nollet (1990) had forecasted in their estimation for 1992. Property agents in Britain, in particular, blame the British economic recession for the slow down in growth over the last few years, although the absence of statistical data on British property purchases means that the effects of that recession can only be estimated from property sales records that are specific to particular places (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of rural property sales to different nationalities in the Département of Calvados, 1989-1991

Home location of buyers	1989	1990	1991
France	870	839	781
Britain	162	101	56
Other EC nations	10	6	10
Other nations	14	15	14

Note: This table only provides information on communes of less than 2000 inhabitants.

Source: SAFER Basse Normandie, Notifications d'Acte de Vente, Caen.

For information of a more general nature, limited methods such as the record of permanent foreign residents collected on a sample survey basis as part of the French census have to be relied upon. According to this record, the British group of the EC foreign population in France rose from 2.1% in 1982 to 3.8% in 1990 (Table 2). These figures are very similar to those from Belgium and Germany and although significant, are not however, components of major flows of labour immigration (Ogden, 1989). Another significant observation when looking at regional numbers of officially registered British residents is that there has been a shift towards more rural areas between 1980 and 1991. Whereas the Ile de France (Paris Central) dominated British long-stay residency permits up to the late 1980s, areas such as Brittany, Normandy and most of the regions crossing central France from the Atlantic to the Massif Central (Poitou-Charente, Limousin and the Auvergne) became the focus of British in-migration (Table 3) by 1991. Historically, these areas have not been popular for relocation amongst French people or foreigners (Dean, 1987). Furthermore, the increased British presence in areas that differ from earlier migration flows seem to imply that the reasons for these movements have changed from the early 1980s.

Despite this information, very little is known about these migration trends and more evidence would need to be collected if a more representative picture is to be drawn.

Table 2 : The European Community population of France, 1982-1990

Country of nationality	Number of residents from each nation in 1982	% of EC total, 1982	Number of residents from each nation in 1990	% of EC total, 1990
Belgium	52,636	3.3	56,129	4.3
Denmark	2,216	0.1	3,544	0.2
Germany	44,000	2.8	52,723	4.0
Greece	7,812	0.5	6,091	0.5
Ireland	1,716	0.1	3,542	0.3
Italy	340,308	21.3	252,759	19.3
Luxembourg	3,304	0.2	3,40	0.2
Netherlands	14,324	0.9	17,881	1.3
Portugal	767,304	48.1	649,714	49.5
Spain	327,156	20.5	216,047	16.4
United Kingdom	34,000	2.1	50,422	3.8

Source: Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (1992)

Table 3 : British carte de séjour holders by region, 1980 and 1991

Region	1980		1991		1980-1991
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total	1991 as % of 1980
Alsace	529	1.49	1,019	1.82	192.6
Aquitaine	1,907	5.25	3,236	5.80	169.7
Auvergne	279	0.76	431	0.77	154.5
Bourgogne	290	0.79	594	1.06	204.8
Bretagne	485	1.33	1,601	2.87	330.1
Centre	526	1.45	924	1.65	175.7
Champagne-Ardenne	273	0.75	324	0.58	118.7
Corse	199	0.55	110	0.19	55.3
Franche Comté	172	0.47	293	0.52	170.3
Ile de France	18,373	50.62	22,613	40.57	123.1
Languedoc-Roussillon	999	2.75	2,270	4.07	227.2
Limousin	112	0.30	582	1.04	519.6
Lorraine	355	0.97	613	1.09	172.7
Midi Pyrénées	1,023	2.82	3,219	5.77	314.7
Nord-Pas de Calais	1,247	3.43	2,074	3.72	166.3
Normandie (Basse)	312	0.86	1,067	1.91	342.0
Normandie (Haute)	720	1.98	1,098	1.97	152.5
Pays de la Loire	575	1.58	1,193	2.14	207.5
Picardie	544	1.50	882	1.58	162.1

Poitou-Charentes	353	0.97	1,083	1.94	306.8
Provence/Alpes/ Côte d'Azur	4,289	11.81	5,944	10.66	138.6
Rhône Alpes	2,694	7.42	4,181	7.50	155.2

Source: Ministère de l'Intérieur (1980, 1991) Autorisations de Séjours délivrées en Préfectures, Paris.

Growing demand in the late 1980s was stimulated by the widening gap between house prices in the UK and the prices being paid for run-down properties in France (Gallent, 2000). The best selling book by Peter Mayle (1989) of his life in Provence further stimulated the desire and motivation to experience a more relaxed French life-style in many households. The dream of a rural home which Britons perceived as no longer attainable in the UK, combined with positive feedback from existing owners was suddenly given an opportunity to be realised. The economic recession in 1991, however, has meant that the number of Britons acquiring property in France has declined and maybe the realisation amongst some buyers that their dream of rural France was not quite as perfect as they might have expected.

2.2.2 The perspective of the host country

Buller and Hoggart (1994) rightly state that recent French generations have been increasingly cut off from rural origins. If prior to World War II, it was regarded as “the norm” for a French family to purchase land and properties as an investment for their future, it is no longer the trend. In fact, new generations have been selling their inherited properties for several decades now as a result of changing priorities: The need to remain in urban areas while in their working years combined with the modern demands of increasing capital expenditure. This continuing pattern of countryside depopulation has left the rural property market open to foreign investment (Gallent, 2000). In fact, many French owners had come to rely on France being seen as an extension of “British” rural

housing markets (Hoggart and Buller, 1995). The lack of buying opportunities in rural Britain has meant that:

.....It is inevitable that those who wish to acquire a rural haven will either have to compromise on their “dream” or look to satisfy their desires outside Britain (Hoggart and Buller, 1995, p.181).

2.3 The impacts of second home growth

As discussed earlier, life-style choice has been recognised as being a key factor in migration and residential relocation behaviour, especially at particular stages of individual life-cycles (Nijkamp et al.1993). The migration to rural places is usually linked to the desire of migrants to satisfy a need for life-style choices often related to recreation values and amenity environments and landscapes (Williams and Hall, 2000).

However, these expectations and the existing agricultural activity may be in conflict if the idealised perceptions of rurality held by the second home owner do not meet reality. For instance, the price of land may be increased by high demand from people in search of their dream life-style,

“while rural gentrification may lead to fragmented land ownership and increased human presence and disturbance of local ecosystems” (Riebsame et al. 1996).

Such situations may cause local residents and migrants (second home and permanent), to occupy a “shared but separate” regional space with serious implications for the local community, including environmental and political issues (Ward et al 1995) and in the longer term, sustainability. For example, agricultural practices (including the use of manure and aeroplanes) may not be welcome by the second home owners who have chosen the area for fresh air and tranquillity. In some villages, the noise and smell from such activities have generated resentment and opposition by the residents, including second home owners leading to the contestation of space issues.

At the centre of their study, Hoggart and Buller (1995) argue that the demand from British buyers has mainly occurred in areas of economic decline and the properties acquired were often dilapidated. In that sense, new investments have been welcomed by the localities who had previously failed to attract domestic interest.

Second homes may serve both short-term or long-term purposes; in the short term, they provide an occasional recreational space and in the long term, they may be transformed into a first home or a place to retire (Clout, 1977, p.57).

2.4 Retirement migration

It is important to clarify at this stage that although many migrants are retired, this does not necessarily mean that they are all of state pension age. The main problem of confusing “retirement” with “old age” is that although it may be true that both partners retire once the man reaches retirement age, his wife might be quite a few years younger than him (O’Reilly, 2000). Many retired migrants to France have taken early retirement from their employment or simply chosen to stop working and live on their capital; meaning that they are younger than the retirement age and financially independent. However, long distance moves to environmentally attractive regions are most evident among people in their late fifties and early sixties (Warnes 1986).

Amongst the main reasons for the overall growth of international retirement migration are:

1. Increases in longevity which has allowed people to anticipate longer periods of enjoyment while still remaining active once retired.
2. An increase in lifetime earnings and subsequent savings so that more individuals have the opportunity to consider a range of retirement options including migration abroad.
3. Ease of travel and the exposure to different countries’ life styles have raised people’s awareness and increased their experience.

Furthermore, repeat holiday visits may act as a stepping stone to seasonal or permanent migration, often via the purchase of a holiday home (Williams et al. 2000).

As well as the climate, migrants are moving for a better way life, to a place they are familiar with and feel comfortable in, away from a place they sometimes feel less comfortable (O'Reilly, 2000). It is not just an economic decision although the relatively low costs of accommodation can be extremely attractive. Unlike places like the Costa del Sol which is strongly supported by tourism and its associated infrastructure, the specific attraction of the French countryside is that it appears

.....to provide supposedly unchanging landscapes and ways of life which fit idealised middle-class British myths of a lost but highly desirable, rurality (Buller and Hoggart, 1994).

In a study of British home owners in France by Hoggart and Buller (1995), it is interesting to read that 43% of migrants had never previously visited the “département” in which they had purchased their home for holiday purpose, while only 7% of retired movers mentioned that their previous familiarity with the area through holidays had been a factor in their decision to buy. This in fact contradicts earlier studies (Longino 1992; Hogan 1987) which state that very few amenity-seeking migrants move to places they have not visited before and previous holidays are likely to be the most important factor. These opposite views could highlight the fact that British migrants to French rural areas do not seek amenities as they perceive them to be associated with the “busyness” they are trying to avoid.

2.5 Cultural differences

2.5.1 “Les Anglais” buying in France

Buller and Hoggart (1994) argue that conflicts resulting from migration might be intensified in France because the British have a very different perception of rurality from the host population. Newcomers often seek to protect their dream home/location by being critical of local practices. Britons tend to be younger than their hosts and whilst the French are typically working class, the British are higher earning and regarded as “petits bourgeois” (Gallent, 2000). Just as importantly, the perspectives of the countryside from both side are often totally unrelated; whilst the French see it as way of making a living or a more affordable place to live than the “city”, the British tend to hold on to their dream of beautiful and tranquil rural scenery. Buller and Hoggart (1994) also demonstrated that British sensibilities and French rural values often differed and that deep-rooted French traditions like hunting for instance could cause upheaval amongst the British. Having said that, there is little evidence of social rural tension. Ninety four per cent of British second home owners felt that they had been welcomed to rural France (Buller and Hoggart, 1994). Interestingly, most of the resentment, if present, was witnessed amongst Britons themselves. Some owners felt that the growing numbers of Britons spoilt the French “rural charm” whilst others felt ashamed of their compatriots, claiming that their attitude alienated the locals. This was the result of “British communities” who preferred to create their own English-speaking world rather than learn French and mix with French people. However, it would be difficult to generalise since

.....factors which separate those who seek English enclaves from those who attempt to integrate their local community are linked more to value differences and to dissimilar objectives in buying a French home (Buller and Hoggart, 1994b, p 205).

2.5.2 The language barrier

Language is a key requirement for integration since it enables communication between the migrant population and the host society (King *et al*, 2000). Poor knowledge of the local language represents a major barrier to cross-cultural connection and rapport with the local community. Any individual who chooses to live in a country where a different language to his/her own is spoken, would be able to confirm that unless you have a good knowledge of that language, it is very difficult to integrate. France is no different in that respect. Learning the language is not just about communication, it is also the doorway into a new culture, contrasting views and different attitudes. Knowing what people are saying is one thing; it is quite another to understand why they are saying it. The linguistic and administrative barriers faced by many migrants have proved too much to overcome and as a result, a number have now left France (Gallent, 2000). Attitudes and efforts made to speak the French language are generally appreciated and greatly rewarded by the acceptance of the French residents and their welcome to join their community. Yet, according to a survey published in *The Independent* (2001), slightly more than one-third of British people can speak a language other than their mother tongue; in contrast, more than half of European nationals can as a whole.

...."The UK remains behind its European partners in total Modern Foreign Language provision. In those countries, pupils start earlier and continue longer"(Nuffield Inquiry, 1998).

One possible explanation for this phenomena is that many British adults are still put off learning languages by poor teaching methods and memories of school. Many are discouraged rather than inspired when they hear other nationalities speaking English perfectly, leaving them intimidated. They tend to focus on how well foreign nationals speak English and as a result, associate learning a language with complete fluency.

On the other hand, Peter Lutzeir (1999), the Head of Surrey University's School of Languages and International Studies blames the dominance of English across the globe. "Everybody knows that English is the international business language and people may think 'what is the point?'" He also states that languages are perceived as difficult subjects.

2.6 Conclusion

Reliable statistics on retirement migration to France are difficult to acquire which has lead to a lack of rigorous analysis. Most of the available data sources tend to be non-age specific, fail to define "retired" as discussed earlier, exclude those who live less than six months a year in the destination and are further disrupted by persistent and widespread under-registration (Williams et al. 1997). It has also become clear as this review progressed that migration researchers have until today, mainly been concerned with the role of tourism in informing retirement migration decisions. There has been little focus on the success and failure factors of migration in French rural areas.

3.0 Methodology

Although previous academic work gives the reader an important insight into the motives and the overall pattern for migration from Britain to France, it fails to analyse the phenomena at an individual level, and therefore, fails to allow the potential buyer to learn from the mistakes and successes of others. This chapter illustrates the methodology which was used for the primary research in an attempt to identify the missing links of the literature review.

*“Primary research consists of information collected for the specific purpose at hand”
(Kotler et al 1996 p.150)*

The aim of our primary research was therefore to collect data from British people who had experienced property ownership in France, with a view to determine the contributing factors to the outcome of their venture.

3.1 What is research?

*The aim, as far as I can see, is the same in all sciences. Put simply and cursorily, the aim is to make known something previously unknown to human beings. It is to advance human knowledge, to make it more certain or better fitting... The aim is ... discovery
(Elias, 1986, p.20)*

The research in this study has been carried out using the methods and traditions of social science, focusing on people and their social behaviour and all three types of research shown in Figure1 have been used.

Figure 1. Types of research (Veal, 1997)

- Descriptive research - finding out, describing what is
- Explanatory research - explaining how or why things are as they are
(and using this to predict)
- Evaluative research - evaluation of policies and programmes

3.2 The selection of methods and its process

According to Kotler (1996), primary research can be collected in three different ways: observation, experiment or in the form of a survey. The latter option was chosen for its ability to gather more data than the other two, in a relatively shorter period of time. However, the selection of the type of survey needed to reach the right audience, was proving to be a serious dilemma. Apart from half a dozen people who were known to the writer for owning a French property, there were no other obvious sources of information which would disclose the identity of British property owners in France. In order to be sure of the reliability of the results, it was also deemed imperative to study no less than one hundred people as well as gathering quality information through in-depth questioning. Finally, and to add to the difficulty of the situation, it was considered important that all interviewees should answer the same set of questions if the results were not to be distorted.

A questionnaire-based survey was selected as the principal research method for the study after establishing that quantified information was required, concerning a specific population; the respondents' own accounts of their behaviour and attitudes would be accepted as the main source of information. The form in which the questionnaire was to be delivered needed to suit all people including those who were not familiar with electronic technology. However, in order to reach a large audience in search for the relevant people, it was necessary to design an electronic questionnaire which was placed

on various user groups and sent to large numbers of names within address books. On completion of the form, the user responses were automatically directed to a pre-allocated Email address, ready for process. A hard copy of the questionnaire was made available to those who did not have a computer available and was either sent by post or hand delivered. In all cases, the responders filled in the form during their own time and without interference from the writer.

3.3 The Pilot Survey

A ‘trial run’ was undertaken as a pilot to test out the questionnaire wording, the question sequencing and the questionnaire layout. It represented an opportunity for the writer to ensure that the interviewee understood the questions without getting confused but also to change any questions which did not lead to relevant information to the research. For instance, Question 5 which initially asked “At the time, did you have any children?” was changed to “At the time, did you have any children in full education?” after the first respondent indicated that her two children were 31 and 28. The purpose of that question was to differentiate between ‘adults only’ purchasers and ‘family’ groups. Personal questions were moved from positions 3, 4 and 5 to 18, 19 and 20 after it was reported that people were more at ease towards the end of the interview. The general sequence of questions was also rearranged according to the motivation process which the respondent would have had to go through when purchasing his/her property. Finally, Questions 15 and 16 which only offered a “Yes” and “No” response were expanded to a request to explain the reasons for their answer. Without this last change, the research would have failed to identify an important influence factor to the results of this study.

3.4 The Sampling

The population for this research project was very clearly defined:

“A British subject who had owned OR who currently owned a property in France”.

Potential buyers whether in dream or reality were not included in the population as they would not have been able to contribute to all aspects of the study.

The question of whether the sample was representative of the population was to be largely related to its size due to the difficulty in locating the “population” in the first place. The logical thinking behind this decision was that, the larger the sample, the more chance it had to be representative.

3.5 Finding the Population

Finding ‘British property owners in France’ still remained a major problem to be solved as no organisations nor governmental bodies were willing to disclose their identity. It was clear that the answer was not going to be found in any one single location and consequently, several options (Table 4) were followed, some proving to be more successful than others.

Table 4 Finding the Survey Population

Options	Description	Response numbers	Difficulties encountered
Friends and Family	Used as network	5	Willing but forgetful
Individual approach	Making everyone aware of my searching for property owners in France	6	Dependent on continuous effort and remembering
Personally created user groups on the web	Creation of 3 personal groups using different providers	2	Too many groups leading to lack of interest
Shop Adverts	Posters in busy shopping areas + Questionnaires left behind the counter	8	Slow and intermittent
Newspaper Adverts in France	Contacted "The News" aimed at British readers	0	Too expensive therefore dismissed
Established user group of British Expatriates in France	Joined a very active and friendly group with interesting values and experiences to relate	28	overloaded with other messages addressed to other members
Forwarded chain request	Asking one responder to pass on questionnaire to another	8	None as they were all opportunists

Source: British Owners in France Survey

3.6 Questionnaire Design

Rather than starting with a list of questions to be included in the questionnaire, the writer examined the management, the planning and the different types of information which needed to be addressed during the course of the survey. Like in any research project, the most important and the most difficult part of this dissertation was to identify and define the concepts involved in the study such as motivations, attitudes and needs. The general representations linked to the ‘French property purchase phenomena’ were regarded as the ‘building blocks’ of our survey and therefore, determined its direction from the outset. At the same time, it was also important to decide how these concepts were going to be measured, if quantitative in nature or acknowledged, if qualitative. The information which needed to be collected from the questionnaire was divided into three groups:

1. Respondent characteristics: Who?
2. Activities/behaviour: What?
3. Attitudes/motivations: Why?

Closed and Open-ended questions

Both types of questions were included in the questionnaire. Pre-coded questions were used when quantified information was needed, such as age or numbers of people who purchased their French property as an investment as opposed to a holiday home. On the other hand, open-ended questions were offering the respondents, the opportunity to answer freely without being influenced by the questionnaire wording. Some closed questions such as Q12, Q15 and Q16 pursue the investigation further by asking a second and sometimes third question in order to discover the reason for the respondent’s answer. The main aim of the study was to find out the reasons as to why people fail or succeed in their venture and unless the “population” was given freedom of speech, the results could have been viewed as bias.

How often to use open-ended questions is usually a matter of judgement. The fact that people are often too busy or too lazy to write out their own thoughts was given careful consideration before deciding that a questionnaire of 20 questions could support 8 open-ended ones. As a French national living in England, the writer had often experienced that British People were generally extremely keen to speak to her about France, and especially, about their own experiences of the country.

Order and Sequence

The aim of the questionnaire design was to collect information in a logical sequence, recalling events, expectations and attitudes in their correct order of happening. This would not only ensure that the respondent would be less confused when recalling the past but also, that the final analysis of the results would be easier for the writer.

The first thing which needed to be done was to take the interviewee right back to the beginning of the “story” by asking him/her to recall the moment it happened. This was not so much for the importance of the date in terms of the research as for the psychological effect it would have on the respondent (Q1 and Q2). By reliving the past, his/her answers are likely to be more reliable.

Question number	Purpose to be established	Story stage
Q3 and Q4	What leads to the decision?	Prior purchase
Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8 and Q9	Description of the property and area/ motivations	Purchase
Q10	Personal involvement/ dream becomes reality or nightmare?	Post purchase
Q11	Reasons for purchase versus reality	Established ownership
Q12	What is the situation now?	Current time

By the time the respondent answered Question 12, he/she should have grown to trust the interviewer and would feel happy to speak about more personal issues.

Questions 13 and 14 were asked with the view to address the second objective of the dissertation. Both questions appear to be simple and non-threatening to the interviewee, when in fact, they are dealing with a very important and difficult aspect of the research: “Could the respondent’s knowledge of the French language prior to the purchase, and his/her ability to progress in speaking French during their stay, represent key success factors to the venture?”. Although it would have been tempting to ask the interviewee whether he/she had made some efforts to learn French, this could have resulted in the respondent losing confidence and becoming defensive, causing incurable damage to the interview.

Sensitive issues such as relationships and feelings (Questions 15 and 16) were left towards the end of the questionnaire, when the interviewee was the most likely to speak freely. However, a few more personal but simple closed questions needed to follow before concluding the survey and the journey back from ‘memory lane’, leaving the respondent happy and rested from his deep recalling thoughts.

Key Questions

At the heart of this thesis, lies the question: “Why does the purchase of a French property turn out to be a success for some British owners and a failure for others?”. Yet, if the interviewee was asked such a broad open question, he/she would probably find it difficult to answer. It is not uncommon for people to struggle for words when they are faced with an open question. The aim is therefore, to lead the respondent towards an honest account of his/her personal experience without influencing him/her one way or the other. From previous experience, the writer already knew that activities such as local events, community groups and musical interests figured amongst the most popular means of mixing with ‘French locals’; in turn, this connection helped British people adapt to the French way of life. Question 15 starts by finding out whether the respondent found it easy to mix with the French. If the answer is ‘Yes’, the interviewer offers the

three reasons as stated earlier, in the hope that it might trigger other suggestions from the interviewee. However, if the answer is 'No', the respondent is asked to explain the main problems. The absence of suggestions in the event of a negative answer is mainly based on the fact that people usually have much to say after a bad experience, and therefore do not need to be prompted.

The other important aspect to be examined was the issue of "British communities" within France. Reports in the press have exposed this problem on a sufficient number of occasions for the writer to feel that further investigation was needed. The difficulty remained once again in the phrasing of the questions. For reasons of political correctness, it would not have been advisable to ask the interviewee if he/she belonged to a British community. Question 16, however, manages to establish whether the respondent is in regular contact with groups of British people, without raising suspicion in the interviewee's mind about the purpose of the question.

Questionnaire Analysis as related to dissertation objectives:

Objective number	Question number(s) from questionnaire
1	3, 3a, 4, 4a, 7, 11, 13, 18, 19, 20.
2	13, 13a, 14, 15, 15a, 15b, 15c.
3	15, 15a, 15b, 15c, 16, 16a, 16b, 17.
4	1, 2, 3, 3a, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 10a, 11, 12, 12a, 12b, 13, 13a, 14, 15, 15a, 15b, 15c, 16, 16a, 16b, 17, 18, 19, 20.

3.7 Evaluation of methodology

The ‘trial run’ which was undertaken in the early part of the survey played a major part in the success of the questionnaire design. However, of the first 5 paper copies received, only 1 person had answered Question 3 as expected by the writer.

Question 3 asked the respondent to give his/her initial reasons(s) for the purchase, in order of priority, and offered six possible choices to be prioritised. The writer expected to see number 1 to be written next to the main reason, number 2 for the next one and so on. Instead, 3 out of 5 interviewees placed a tick next to one or more of the options, therefore making no prioritisation in their choices.

This anomaly was overcome by using a different wording for the Hyperlink questionnaire compared to the hard copy, which clearly separated the choices on offer and only enabled one choice in each section to be selected.

What were the initial reasons(s) for the Purchase?

Section 1: The main reason for the purchase

Section 2: The secondary reason if any for the purchase

Section 3: Any additional reason for the purchase

As a result of this modification, the information collected electronically (38 questionnaires in total) showed no evidence of misunderstanding from the respondents’ part.

Despite this initial error, the writer believes that the results attained are representative and have not affected the results of the research.

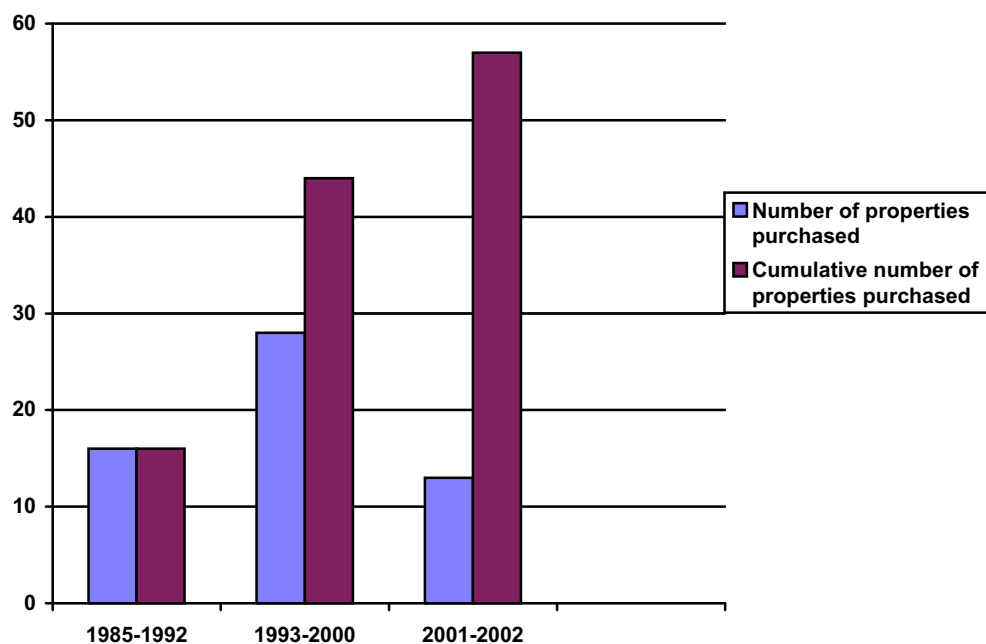
4.0 Results and Discussion

Despite all the efforts made by the writer to obtain information from no less than one hundred people, it was only possible to collect 57 questionnaires over a period of nine months; locating the sample had proven to be an even bigger problem than anticipated. However, the quality of the responses has undoubtedly exceeded the researcher's expectations; most of the respondents (90%) have volunteered information which has permitted the writer to acquire a much deeper understanding of the issues British property owners had to face when buying a property in France. The same percentage of people has also requested to be kept informed of the results of the research.

4.1 Trends since 1985

For ease of analysis, the results referring to the year of purchase were grouped in three consecutive periods. The first two periods covered an equal time span of 8 years whereas the third one only considered the last 2 years (Fig.2). In 2002, nine British people had bought a French property as opposed to four in 2001. The general trend of results showed a strong growth since 1985, suggesting even greater prospects over the next 6 years. These findings appear to confirm the pattern of growth described in the literature review.

Figure 2



In terms of seasons, although more purchases were made in the spring as opposed to the summer, the respondents have indicated that a number of factors, outside their control, have contributed to this; French legislation, business culture and “les vacances d’été”, where the whole of France seems to function at a much reduced pace, were amongst the most.

Table 5

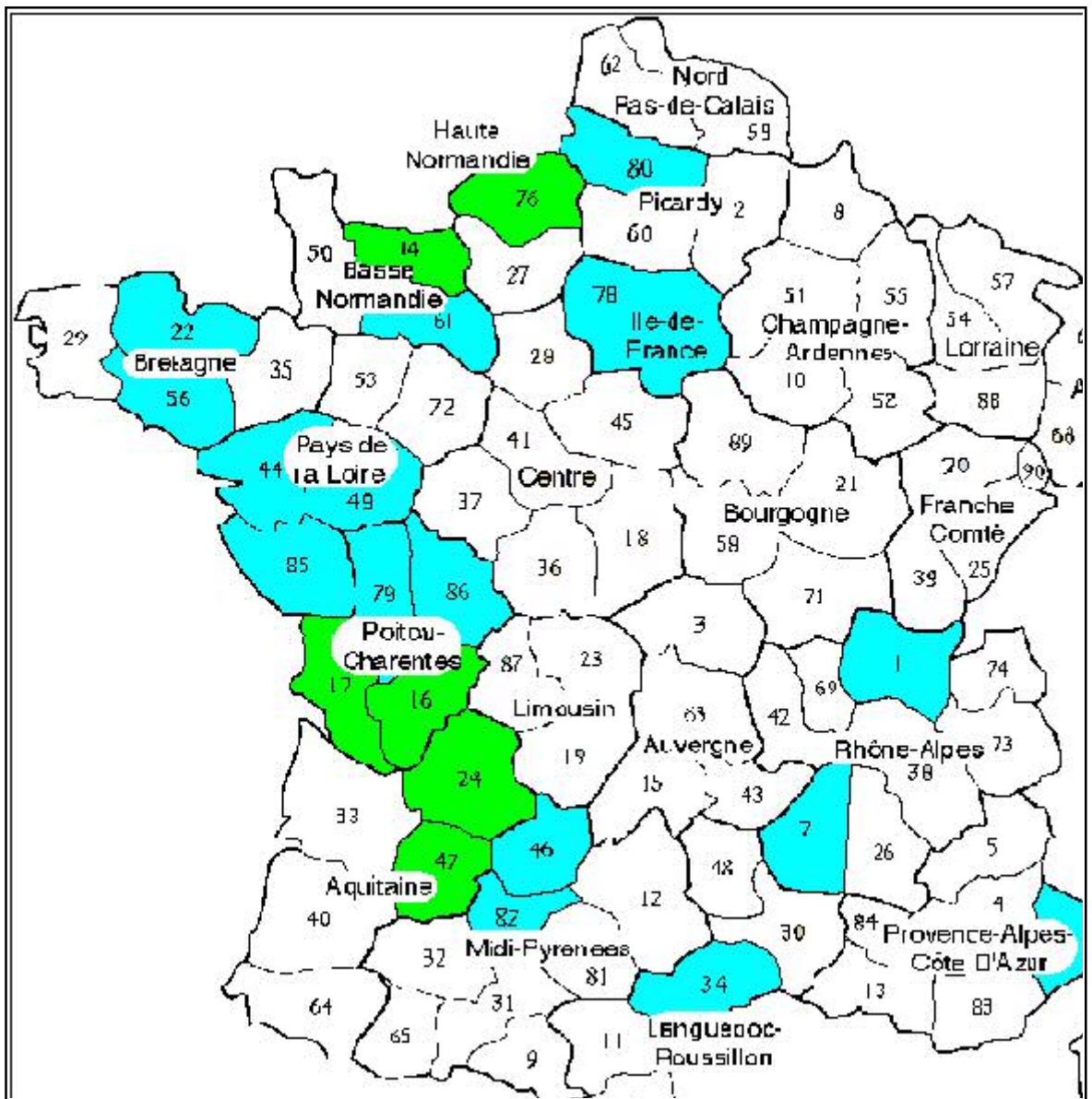
Season	Number of purchases	Proportion of total
Spring	20	35.1%
Summer	6	10.5%
Autumn	14	24.6%
Winter	17	29.8%

With regards to the British migration trends which had already been identified in previous studies and which showed a shift from the 'Ile de France' to more rural areas between 1980 and 1991, the writer was able to collect more evidence and therefore draw a more representative picture of the areas currently in favour (Figure 3). The most significant numbers were, perhaps not surprisingly, those found in the Dordogne with 37% of the survey population having chosen the area to buy the house of their dreams. The combined departments of Charente and Charente-Maritime were also significant in numbers with 14% of the respondents owning a property in that part of the country. The Normandie region and the 'Lot et Garonne' had attracted smaller numbers with 12% and 9% of the interviewees respectively.

The distribution of the remainder of the properties were as follows:

Location	Number of properties
La Vendee	1
Tarn et Garonne	1
The Vienne	2
Herauld	2
South East	2
Lot	1
Brittany	1
Loire Valley	1
Ain	2
Paris	1
Ardeche	1

Figure 3: British migration trends to départements and regions of France



Department name	Department number
Dordogne	24
Charente	16
Charente Maritime	17
Lot et Garonne	47

■ Most popular areas
■ Other response areas

In an attempt to further investigate the migration trend to rural areas as opposed to towns and cities, the interviewer asked the owners to be specific as to the location of their properties. The responses left no doubt in the writer’s mind and confirmed that British owners preferred living in rural France.

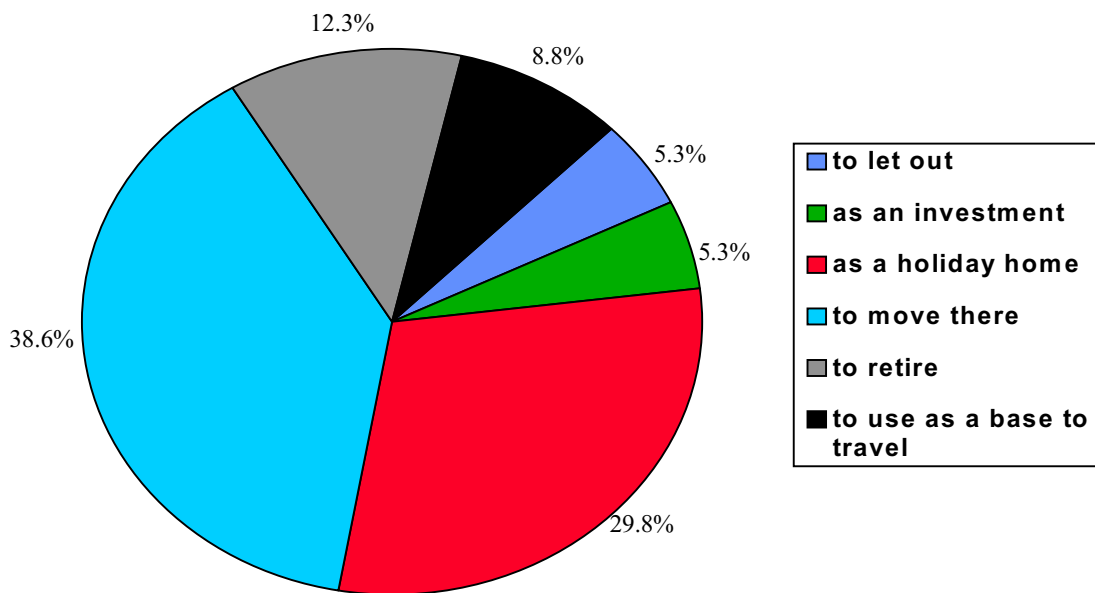
Location	Per cent
Town/City	7%
Village/Hamlet	65%
Other location	28%

4.2 The initial reasons

All 57 respondents gave at least one reason for their decision to purchase a house in France and the most frequent answer was “in order to move to France and live there”, followed by “to use as a holiday home”.

Figure 4

What were the initial reasons for the purchase?



The graph shows that two very different groups, yet identical in size, emerge from the study population. Although some people had described their primary reason as “to move there” and others “to retire”, the end result is that 50% of the people interviewed had bought their house in order to live in France as opposed to acquire a second home. Furthermore, of the people who had purchased their house for holidays, 65% indicated that they also intended to retire in France at some later stage of their life.

When people were asked why they had chosen France as opposed to another country, the large majority (70%) gave more than two reasons with the most frequent answers being described in Table 6.

Table 6

Why France?	Percentage
Space/Countryside	83%
Weather	69%
Culture	65%
Ease of access	60%
Food & Wines	53%
Language	37%

Other issues such as quality of life, price of properties, feelings of ‘belonging’ and fulfilment of a dream were also acknowledged on several occasions. All these reasons tend to confirm our earlier findings from secondary research. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, much information was volunteered by the respondents who were keen to tell the writer about deeply rooted emotions.

.....“ *I was fed up with the UK and its politics, its traffic congestion, its cost of living and its stresses*”.

.....“ *The French have their priorities right: a full table, a ‘clapped out’ car and a ‘flaky’ house. In Britain, people have’ this year’s car’, a pretty house and beans on toast in front of the telly*”.

.....“ *The ferocious pace of living in the UK is doing my head in!.....There is absolutely no balance of importance between quality time spent with the family, and work*”.

The type of dwelling also mattered to most with 31 of the 57 respondents having chosen an old farm with one or more barns attached to it; the size of the land varied between one and eight acres. These figures tie in well with the initial need to find space and enjoy the countryside. Other properties included stone houses, typical of the locality; a ‘maison maître’, an old village forge and nine single storey bungalows. For the majority of the farms and barns (64%), owners had to deal with major structural repairs compared to only minor decorative work in the case of bungalows.

As a variation of the information collected by Hoggart and Buller (1995) in their study, which had led them to discover that 43% of British migrants had never visited the “département” in which they had purchased their French home, the writer was curious to find out whether people had looked at other areas of France before buying their house. Over 63% of the population survey had looked at two or more areas, which in the majority of cases, belonged to the zone previously identified on the map (Fig.3). A few had travelled through most of France in search for their property, exploring the east part of the country as well as the Atlantic coast.

.....“ *We did not want to buy a house in the Dordogne because we knew that most of the British went there. So, we went to see other areas. But, when we passed through the Perigord, we fell in love with our house*”.

Table 7: Did you look at other areas before?

	Numbers of owners	Yes	No
Dordogne	21	14	7
La Vendee 1	1	-	1
Tarn et Garonne 1	2	2	-
Lot et Garonne 5	5	4	1
The Vienne 2	2	2	-
Normandie 5	5	3	2
Herault 2	2	-	2
South East 2	2	2	-
Charente Maritime 3	3	1	2
Charente 5	5	4	1
Lot 1	1	-	1
Haute Normandie 2	2	-	2
Brittany 1	1	1	-
Loire Valley 1	1	-	1
Ain 2	2	2	-
Paris 1	1	1	-
Ardeche 1	1	-	1
Total	57	36	21

Amongst the specific reasons for their final choice of the area, were a multitude of statements which often related to their own specific interests; the keen gardener would refer to the “*fertile ground*”, “*more cultivable*” whereas the dreamer would remember “*like the south of England used to be*”.

Bearing in mind the main purpose of this study which was “to help potential buyers in their decision to purchase a property in France”, it might prove useful to the reader to

look at some of the descriptions given by the respondents during the research and relating to the locations mentioned earlier.

Dordogne	<i>Beautiful open countryside. Green all year round, warm, rolling hills and woods. Good climate. Remote in places but not too isolated. Like the south of England used to be. Nice old towns and villages. Less arid than further south and more accessible. Better location, better prices. Good wines and great food.</i>
La Vendee	<i>Good climate, close to Channel Ports.</i>
Tarn et Garonne	<i>Beautiful countryside.</i>
Lot et Garonne	<i>Fertile ground, lower rainfall. Attractive towns and cities. Good weather and climate. Some activity all year round.</i>
The Vienne	<i>“Nice” landscape, not too dramatic.</i>
Normandie	<i>Value for money. Easy access. “We felt that we were meant to be there”. Not too many Brits. Would love it to be further south eg Lot et Garonne, where it doesn’t rain so much.</i>
Herault	<i>Close to Mediterranean, mountains and lakes.</i>
South East	<i>Easy to let out, next door to Monaco.</i>
Charente Maritime	<i>Value for money. Good climate, lots of space, woods. Not too far from the UK for friends and family to visit. Good food.</i>
Charente	<i>Beautiful rolling countryside, relatively few Brits. Excellent climate and less expensive than the Dordogne.</i>
Lot	<i>Architecture, day’s drive from UK, weather</i>
Haute Normandie	<i>Close to Paris and close to the UK.</i>
Brittany	<i>Easy access, friendly people.</i>
Loire Valley	<i>Superb countryside and magnificent towns. Fascinating history, wonderful wine.</i>
Ardèche	<i>Beautiful and dramatic scenery. Hot summer, mild winter.</i>

These descriptions are of particular value to a British person, due to the fact that they have been collected from other British people rather than French natives. The expectations of the “new owner from Britain” are very different to those whose country it is and who can sometimes take it all for granted, including the writer who was born and brought up in France.

4.3 Who are the British property owners in France?

The age range varied between ‘21 to 35’ and ‘over 65’ and the distribution was as follows:

Age	Frequency	Percent
21 to 35	2	3.5
36 to 50 *	26	45.6
51 to 65 *	24	42.1
over 65	2	3.5
missing value	3	5.3
Total	57	100.0

* Of the ‘36 to 50’ group:

Approximately 30% had bought their French property as a holiday home, were married with children aged between 2 and 15, with many intending to move to France permanently once the children were older.

38% of the same group had bought with the primary intention of moving there and of which 60% had no children in full time education; the other 40% had relatively young children aged between 3 and 10 and therefore had accepted the fact that their children would go to school with “*des enfants français*” and learn to speak as a native. This last point seemed to rate quite high in their overall decision as they often felt that their offsprings would have an opportunity which they, as parents, never had.

Others included those who had decided to let ‘the’ property out for the majority of the year when they did not need it for their own holiday.

* The ‘51 to 65’ group:

Interestingly, this group was essentially made of people who had either taken earlier retirement from their careers in the United Kingdom or who had some private financial reserves which enabled them not to work for a living. Most of that group had no children in full time education at the time of the purchase and half were using their French house for frequent holidays all through the year. The other half had migrated over the English Channel “permanently”.

Their marital status, at the time of the purchase was:

Status	Frequency	Per cent
Married	48	84.2
Single	1	1.8
Widowed	3	5.3
Divorced	5	8.8
Total	57	100.0

One important point that the figures do not show however, is that only 5 out of the 9 people ‘not married’ had ventured into the purchase, totally on their own. According to the respondents, sharing the “social and cultural” risk as well as the financial cost with another individual, played a significant part in their decision. This tends to suggest that unless the purchase of the house can be shared out, few British people would consider the venture.

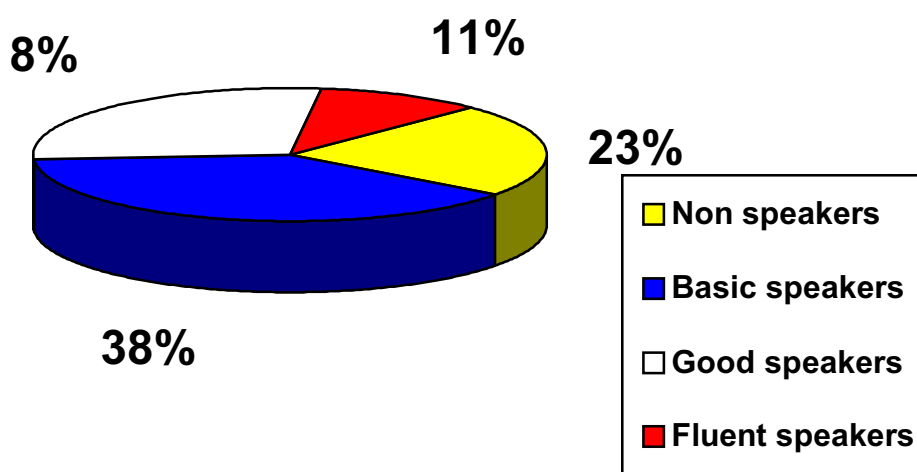
4.4 Was the language a slight predicament or a ‘real’ hindrance?

The second objective of this research was to examine the proportion of French speakers prior to the purchase and monitor their language skills progress. The results of the survey showed that 44 of the 57 respondents (77%), knew some French before they went. These figures are dramatically different from those published in The Independent (2001):

.....”Slightly more than one-third of British people can speak a language other than their mother tongue”.

People were generally well aware of the importance of communicating with the French when they decided to purchase a house in their country and it was clear that they were willing to learn at least some basic words and phrases to get by.

Figure 5: Number of French speakers



Following the initial purchase, most people’s competency in speaking French improved significantly and only 10.5% of the total survey population made no progress at all. This was either due to the fact that their level of knowledge on arrival was already ‘fluent’, or that learning the language was either too difficult or ‘time consuming’ for the non-speakers. Most of those who did not improve, were purchasers who used their French property for holidays, and therefore had less opportunity to mix with the locals for long periods of time.

Although the majority of the respondents had improved in some way, further questioning enabled the writer to discover some significant variations between individuals as far as the level of improvement was concerned.

..... *"As you try to speak with the locals, you get to learn a few more words and you get better at it".*

..... *"I started reading children books to broaden my vocabulary. It was hard at first but I knew I had to do it. Then, one of the ladies of the village kindly agreed to come to my house and spend an hour a week to speak with me and make me work. Little by little, the words were coming together and eventually, I could join in any conversation. It was a wonderful feeling".*

..... *"I had scraped 'O' level French in 1956, so my French was very basic. But since we've moved to France, we both completed a course with C.N.E.D. (Distance learning) and my husband purchased a computer language course in French".*

As more responses were collected, it became apparent that the improvement level of each respondent was directly linked to his/her own personal need for communicating with the French and not simply to his/her ability to learn. While some British people seemed perfectly content just to exchange polite greetings with 'the locals', others wanted to express themselves and understand more; these were often seeking to develop relationships with their 'host' nation. When the respondent viewed the language as an essential way to be accepted and to adapt to his/her 'new' environment, the improvement was noticeably greater than for those with an ability towards languages but with no desire to blend in.

Whether the overall progress changed from knowing no French at all to 'good' or 'fluent' or whether it went from 'basic' to 'good', the majority of the respondents appeared satisfied with their personal improvement and saw it as a worthy achievement.

Some of those who had reported having difficulty learning the language but considered interacting with their French neighbours important, had managed to compensate by mastering non-verbal aspects of communication in the most extraordinary way. Typically, their techniques included general body language, gestures, hand movements, eye contact and facial expressions. These ‘demonstration’ skills had very little affinity with the British reserve which had first characterised these same people on their arrival to France. This non-verbal interaction often had a similar effect of acceptance from the locals than many words spoken in fluent French.

The main reason for investigating language skills and their progress as part of this dissertation was to find out whether they had a part to play in the success or failure of the venture. It was therefore appropriate to examine the relation between Question 13 *“Did you speak French before you went?”* and Question 17 *“Would you buy again?”*. The results of the analysis showed that there was a significant relation between the two and therefore confirmed that someone who had some knowledge of French before attempting the venture, no matter what level, would have more chances to succeed than someone who did not.

Some of the most valuable comments relating to that knowledge and which have been collected during the research give an excellent insight of this issue to the reader.

..... “I cannot emphasise strongly enough the importance of having a good understanding of the language before setting out. It is no use hoping to pick it up as you go along; on arrival is when you need it most. You hope to arrange so many things like residents permits, driving licence, health cards, bank accounts and so on.”

..... “Other Brits you meet who have been there for a while can be helpful but some of them are very wary of having lame ducks as neighbours.”

..... *“You must have a good understanding of the language, otherwise, small problems like a minor car accident can cause real headaches. Also, communicating with GPs and dentists who do not speak any English can be a nightmare”.*

..... *“The English people who encounter the biggest difficulty are those who cannot understand the language and tend to ignore formalities.....”.*

4.5 “When in Rome do as the Romans do.” - But how easy is it?

The third objective of this paper was to identify whether getting involved in local French activities contributed to the success of the property purchase for the British owner. Of the 57 respondents, 46 said that they found it easy to mix with the locals whereas 11 admitted to having problems. At this point, each interviewee was given the opportunity to explain the reasons for this occurrence.

What contributed to the favourable environment for inter-relations?

Amongst those who found it easy, 63% participated in local events, 39% had joined an activity or a community group and 22% shared a musical interest with their French ‘neighbours’. In relation to local events such as the celebration of November 11th, the ‘host’ nation was found to appreciate and value the British presence; this would often be expressed by ‘Monsieur Le Maire’ inviting ‘nos amis anglais’ to attend the lunch after the event: a great honour in the French culture. Generally, the respondents felt that as long as they tried to integrate into the community one way or another, their French neighbours were both very friendly and helpful, happy to accept them as ‘one of theirs’.

.....”*The neighbours are wonderful. They speak no English but we manage quite well with a mixture of old O level French, hand gestures and a French dictionary!..... Go and see for yourself and whilst househunting say “bonjour” to the neighbours*”.

.....”*The most important thing is to try your hardest to fit in and to get to know the locals without losing your own identity*”.

On the other hand, it seemed to be common knowledge and was confirmed by all 57 respondents that unless some effort was made from the part of the British, the French were not willing to help.

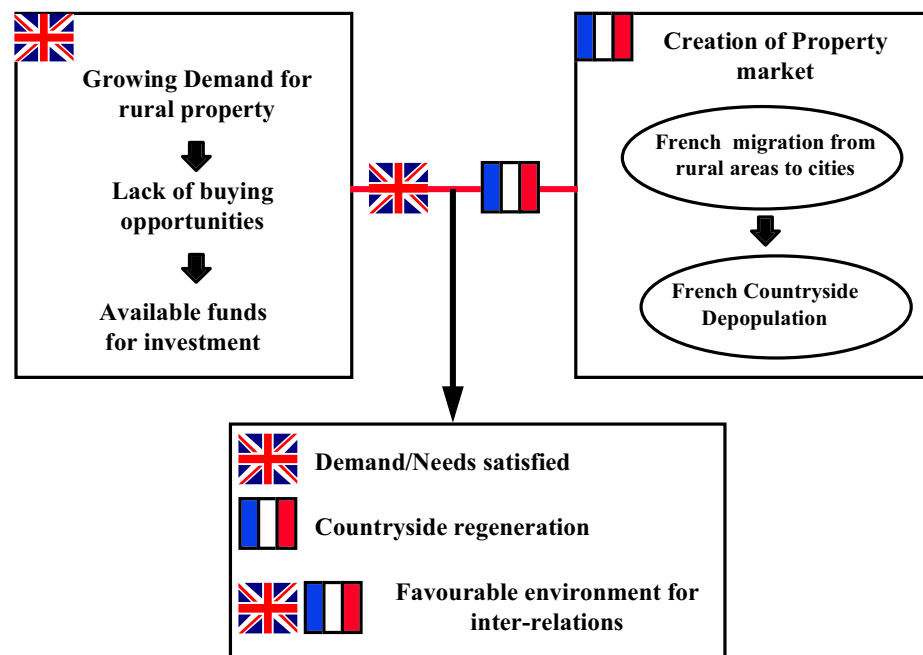
Bearing in mind the earlier figures which stated that 65% of the interviewees were found to live in villages/hamlets, it was no surprise to hear many British owners describing their area as ‘a farming community’. They talked about their French neighbours being keen to know what they were doing, especially when these could see that they were doing most of the work themselves. They would often swap produce, plants and vegetables with their ‘voisins’ who liked to comment on their ‘English style’ garden with flowers. Recalling hard times, one respondent reported:

.....”*After the terrible tempest of 1999, we all helped each other survive*”.

As the research progressed, it became indisputable that once the British owner had become accepted by the local community, the relationship which existed between the two parties was not dissimilar to close family ties.

One of the respondents and his wife had taken over a bankrupt business in a small village and as a result, people were happy to see some regeneration in their community. The atmosphere was described as immediately comfortable and welcoming for the newcomers. This example confirms the points made by Gallent (2000) and Hoggart and Buller (1995) when referring to the French countryside depopulation chain of events and which have been summarised in Fig. 6 for the benefit of the reader.

Figure 6 Demand and Supply chain of events



A lesson from others

Although none of the interviewees had personally admitted to making any *faux pas*, many of them mentioned being aware of other British people’s mistakes when it came to making lasting impressions. As reported earlier in this chapter, one of the attractions for buying a property in France is the price difference with the United Kingdom. Particularly in the case of retirement migration, people usually have to sell their English house in order to buy their French property. With the money from the sale of their house in the United Kingdom, some Britons choose to buy a property which they could

never have afforded in their own country; this can be a dreadful mistake. In France, people tend to be more social class conscious and will only associate with those whom they perceive as having a similar social standing; this perception is often based on the assets one owns. By sending the wrong message to the local community, many Britons were not only finding it hard to join in but also were making it difficult for their neighbouring compatriots.

..... "We made a point from day one of talking and mixing with our French neighbours and made it clear to them that we were not 'Rich Brits' but wanted to be part of the rural community".

What were the main problems?

The reasons given by the 11 interviewees who had reported having problems were related to a whole variety of issues, including lack of language, amount of time spent in the property, culture difference and isolation. These factors were not so much responsible for the success or failure of the venture but more to do with the interaction between locals and British owners.

Despite the fact that they often spoke French, people who had purchased a holiday home found that the periods of stay in their '*domaine*' was usually too short to develop contact or relationships, although on the whole, people were reasonably friendly with them. The same situation applied to one young respondent who lived and worked in France but whose business called him away for most of the time. The situation was further aggravated by the fact that there was a significant age difference between his young family and the locals.

Apart from writing 'culture difference' as one of the problems encountered, 3 respondents offered no further explanation on the subject, regrettably leaving their response open to too many assumptions and too ambiguous for any meaningful conclusion.

One Briton who had migrated to France in order to escape from traffic congestions and crowds, had opted to move to a relatively isolated area. Perhaps not surprisingly, he subsequently found that it was difficult for him to mix with the French. However, this did not appear to be a problem to him.

How tempting was it to join other British groups?

Of the 57 respondents, 80.7% said that they had acquainted other British people during their stay, with 45.7% of those stating that they were meeting them as a group from time to time. It is important to remember at this point, that the survey included people who had permanently migrated as well as secondary home owners and therefore, that the level of interaction varied a great deal from one group to another. Every British person who had chosen to live in France as opposed to spend their holidays there, was included in the 80.7% figure.

..... *"It is inevitable! News of a new British family travel fast, and they find you."*

However, many of those who were now living in France reported keeping a safe distance with their compatriots, confirming the earlier findings of Buller and Hoggart (1994). Popular regions such as the Dordogne were thought to attract a number of 'posers', hence some respondents being wary. Although it would not be unusual for most of the interviewees to enjoy the occasional lunch with British neighbours, they would resist keen invitations to join various 'English activities' such as the Bridge Club and the Dining Club, concerned about the repercussions this might create.

Of those who met from time to time, 38% did so more than once a month and 15% met more than once a week. While the first of the two figures may appear perfectly 'normal' behaviour to the reader, the last figure may suggest the importance of keeping their natural cultural ties in an environment which they have not found totally suited to their lives.

4.6 Looking back

Before reporting on any factors which may have contributed to the failure of the venture, it appears logical to define what is meant by the word ‘failure’ in the respondents’ mind. The easiest way to find out, was to ask Question 17:

“ Would you buy again if you had the knowledge then of what you know now?

Only 3 people of the 57 interviewed replied “No”, representing just over 5% of the survey population. All the others stated that they ‘would do it all again’, despite the difficulties some of them had encountered. On the questionnaire, people were also asked whether they still owned their property today, to which nine answered negatively. The analysis of these two results clearly indicate that, although some Britons may no longer possess their French house, two thirds had no regrets about the purchase venture. Their personal circumstances had simply changed, making them decide to do something else.

What went wrong for those people?

It was interesting to discover that each of the three individuals for whom the purchase had been a failure, had given three very different reasons. In the first case, the respondent had moved to France in 1993 in order to retire. Unfortunately, following the withdrawal of the UK from the ERM and the subsequent fall of the pound sterling, he could no longer afford to sustain his standard of living. Should it have been possible for him to generate income from a French source, he felt that he would not have been exposed to the fluctuations of foreign exchange and therefore, could have avoided the nightmare he had to endure. His situation was not dissimilar to another couple’s, however, the difference in his case was the size of his budget. In his opinion, there was no doubt that if anyone was thinking to move to France, it was essential for them to allow sufficient financial reserves for difficult times; failing that, they would have to accept the possibility of the venture going disastrously wrong. The additional problem in his case was the amount of land he owned which at first, had been one of the main attractions. Not only had it become too much to manage, but it also turned out to be the

continuous target for neighbours, seeking more ground for their crops. With hindsight, rather than getting carried away with the picturesque stone house and its woods and grasslands, “ *it would have been wiser to choose a smaller plot of land and have a modest house built on it, leaving me with some reserves.* ”

The second scenario was the one of an English family who had initially bought their house in France as a holiday home with the intention of spending most of their retirement there in later years. Having chosen a small hamlet for its peace and quiet, they gradually witnessed their “delightful” area become a small dormitory for the nearest town. Over the course of four years, the traffic increased significantly, houses seemed to have grown like mushrooms every time they visited and, the local rules and regulations no longer allowed the freedom they had enjoyed in the beginning. One of the options open to them was to move to another area, although there was no guarantee that history would not repeat itself. However, their decision of putting their house on the market resulted in the unveiling of a whole can of worms, starting with the estate agent’s charges (10% commission) and continuing with the administration papers required by French law. The legislative demands for obscure documents which, if unfound, were threatening the sale to come to a halt, were a far cry from the simple buying process which the respondents had experienced only ten years earlier. As a result of this, the family decided to review the situation and abandon their search for another property. France was not for them.

The third reason given, was that the language had proven too difficult to master and as a result, loneliness had slowly driven the respondent to despair. Despite fulfilling his dream with many positive aspects of a new life, the need to communicate had got the better of him, eventually forcing him to return to Britain. Living in a country where most people do not speak English presented a major problem in this case, something which might not necessarily have happened in the Costa del Sol, where even some remote areas are predominantly English speaking.

Having collected a considerable amount of information from very different people, it was interesting to observe that the factors which had contributed to the failure of the “dream” for some, were not entirely different to the problems others had encountered. However, the principal difference between what some of the respondents saw as a mere difficulty as opposed to an unsolvable problem and the factors described above, were simply a matter of relative proportion.

5.0 Conclusion

With a view to achieve the aims and objectives of this study, the author has examined the relationship between the initial motivation to purchase and the outcome of the venture. The analysis of the factors which led previous and current owners to fail or to succeed, has finally enabled salient points to be drawn.

‘Buying a property in France’, as described in the literature review, has only become a major phenomenon since the 1980s, when British people’s interests and social habits started to change significantly; in search for space and countryside, their need for rural environments was increasing. Housing prices, media reports and Peter Mayle’s experiences amongst others, all contributed to the enthusiasm of the British to buy. Previous academic research has helped identify that retirement migration does not necessarily refer to ‘old’ people and that a holiday home can easily become a permanent accommodation in later years. British sensibilities and French rural values have often been proved to differ, and French traditions are not always well understood by the British, hence the importance of the language.

From the primary research conducted amongst 57 respondents, and its subsequent analysis, the following results have emerged:

1. The main reason why British people buy properties in France is to live there at some stage of their lives, having been attracted by the spacious countryside and the weather. The majority of buyers are aged between 36 and 65, and living with a partner; those with children are more inclined to use the property as a holiday home initially.
2. An impressive 77% of the survey population had some knowledge of French at the time of the purchase and nearly 90% had improved since.

3. Their efforts to socialise with their neighbouring community were often rewarded by a real feeling of belonging and the knowledge of “having done the right thing”.
4. Surprisingly, the writer discovered that nobody had failed due to a clash of culture, but that the success or the failure of the venture depended mainly on people’s financial status, particularly if living in France, and an adequate level of French; the lack of planning for the unexpected rise in expenditure and the demands of basic administrative requirements have been reported as the most common reasons for the failing of the project.

As a result of the many suggestions expressed by the respondents, the following recommendations aim to assist potential buyers in their decision whether to purchase a French property in the future. Although they appear to relate to those who want to live there as opposed to spend holidays, they apply to all, to a varying degree.

- After satisfying yourself that you have selected the right region and the area you want to live in, move to the area and rent temporary accommodation. Then, you can get to know the locality and take your time selecting positions and property. It will also give you the time to question your doubts and decisions.
- Avoid deferring learning the language until after you have moved in as this could seriously jeopardise your success. Although it is possible to communicate in many different ways, words are often the ‘*only way*’ to convey an important message.
- If you would like to join in with the community and live like a French local, remember that within the French culture, the higher the social position you project, the harder it will be for your ‘*voisins*’ to relate to you.
- Finally, it is always advisable to keep an open mind and be willing to accept that France may not fill all your expectations and that you may need to compromise some aspects of your ‘dream’.

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Appendices

List of Appendices

Appendices

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Appendix 1

Dissertation Questionnaire 1 - September 2002

Why do British people purchase properties in France?
and
What makes it a success for some and a failure for others?

1. Which year did you purchase your property in France?

2. What time of the year was it?

Spring Summer Autumn Winter

3. What were the initial reason(s) for the purchase, in order of priority?

To let out	<input type="checkbox"/>
----- As an investment for the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
----- To use as a holiday home	<input type="checkbox"/>
----- In order to move to France and live there	<input type="checkbox"/>
----- For your retirement	<input type="checkbox"/>
----- To use as a travel base within Europe	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other Comments:

4. Why did you choose France as opposed to another country?

Culture	<input type="checkbox"/>
----- Weather	<input type="checkbox"/>
----- Ease of access	<input type="checkbox"/>
----- Food/Wines	<input type="checkbox"/>
----- Language	<input type="checkbox"/>
----- Space/Countryside	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other Comments:

5. Which area of France is/was your property located in?

6. Did you look at other areas of France before selecting that area?

Yes No

If yes, which one(s)?

7. What did this area have in terms of attractiveness over the others?

8. Is/Was your property located in a

Town or City Village or Hamlet Other location

9. Could you describe your property?

(i.e.: converted barn, farm, flat, 2 storey house.....)

10. Did you have to do any renovation or construction work to it?

Yes No

If yes, were they ?

Mainly Decoration and/or Minor Structural repairs

Major Structural repairs/modifications

A New property construction

11. If you purchased the property as a holiday home,

On average and in the last 3 years of ownership,

a. How many visits per year did you make?

b. How many days did you stay per visit?

12. Do you still own the property?

Yes No

If not, why not?

Financial reasons	
Personal reasons	
Health reasons	
Could not get used to the different way of life	
The language barrier	
Too many culture differences	
Missed my home country and friends too much	

Other Comments:

13. Did you speak French before you went?

Yes No

If yes, what level were you at:

Basic Good Fluent

14. Did you become more competent in speaking French during your stay?

Yes No

15. Did you find it easy to mix with the French locals?

Yes No

If Yes, what do you think contributed to this?

Participated in local events	
Joined activity or community group	
Musical interests	

Other reasons:

If No, what were the main problems?

16. Did you get to know other British people who lived in the same area?

Yes No

a. Did you meet with them as a group from time to time?

Yes No

b. If Yes, how often?

17. Would you buy again if you had the knowledge then of what you know now?

Yes No

18. How old were you when you purchased the property in France?

21 to 35 36 to 50 51 to 65 Over 65

19. At the time, were you:

Married Single Widowed Divorced

20. At the time, did you have any children in full time education?

Yes No

If yes:

How many?

How old were they at the time?

Thank you very much for your help.
All the information you have given me is strictly confidential.

Should you be willing to speak to me in more details, you can contact me on:

Email address: **1300277@bournemouth.ac.uk**

or alternatively, write your name and address in the space below and I shall get in touch with you very shortly.

Name:

Address:.....

Telephone number:

- **Would you like to receive a summary of the results of this research when completed via Email?** (If yes, please enter your Email address in the space below:)

Email address:.....

Appendix 2

Why do British people purchase properties in France ?
and
What makes it a success for some and a failure for others ?

This questionnaire has been designed to operate either "ON" or "OFFLINE" mode.

Once you have completed this form

"Click" the "SUBMIT" key at the end of it and your input will be processed into a small attachment that will be sent directly by Email to "Catherine".

Once the Email has been dispatched, you will receive a confirmation message within a few days telling you that the data has arrived.

1. What year did you purchase your property in France ?

2003
2002
2001

2. What time of the year was it ?

Spring Summer Autumn Winter

3. What were the initial reasons(s) for the Purchase :

1. The main reason for the purchase :

To let out
As an investment for the Future
To use as a holiday home

2. The secondary reason if any for the purchase :

To let out
As an investment for the Future
To use as a holiday home

3. Any additional reason for the purchase :

To let out
As an investment for the Future
To use as a holiday home

4. Please add any additional comments if needed here

<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 60px;"></div>
--

4. Why did you choose France as opposed to another country ?

- Culture
- Weather
- Ease of Access
- Food / Wines
- Language
- Space / Countryside

o Please add any additional comments if needed here

5. Which area of France is/was your property located in ?

6. Did you look at other areas of France before selecting that area ?

No Yes

If you selected YES :

o Which area/s ?

7. What did the area have in terms of attractiveness over the others ?

8. Is/was your property located in a :

Town or City Village or Hamlet Other Location

9. Could you describe your property ?
(i.e. Converted barn, farm, Flat, 2 storey house)

10. Did you have to do any renovation or construction work to it ?

No Yes

If you selected YES :

o Were they ?

Mainly Decoration and/or Minor Structural repairs

- Major Structural repairs/modifications
- A New property construction

11. IF you purchased the property as a holiday home

On average and in the last 3 years of ownership.

- o How many visits per year did you make ?

- o How many days did you stay per visit ?

12. Do you still own the property ?

- No Yes

- o If not why NOT ?

- Financial Reasons
- Personal Reasons
- Health Reasons
- Could not get used to the different way of life
- The Language barrier
- Too many culture differences
- Missed my home country and friends too much

- o Other Reasons

13. Did you speak French before you went ?

- No Yes

If you selected YES :

- o What level were you at ?

- Basic Good Fluent

14. Did you become more competent in speaking French during your stay ?

- No Yes

15. Did you find it easy to mix with the French locals ?

- No Yes

o If YES what do you think contributed to this ?

- Participated in local events
- Joined activity or community group
- Musical interests

o Other Reasons

o IF NO what were the main problems ?

16. Did you get to know other British people who lived in the same area ?

No Yes

o Did you meet with them as a group from time to time ?

Yes No

o If YES how often did you meet ?

17. Would you buy again if you had the knowledge then of what you know now ?

No Yes

18. How old were you when you purchased the property in France ?

Under 35 36 to 50 51 to 65 Over 65 Rather NOT Say

19. At the time, were you :

Single Married Divorced Widowed Rather NOT Say

20. At the time, did you have any children in full time education :

No Yes Rather NOT Say

if you selected YES :

o How many ?

- o How old were they at that time :

And Finally

All the information you have given me is strictly confidential.

Should you be willing to speak to me in more detail, you can contact me on:

Email Address:

1300277@bournemouth.ac.uk

- o Would you like to receive a summary of the results of this research when completed ?

No Yes

- o If necessary, may I contact you again in the near future ?

No Yes

If you answered YES to either of the last two questions, please enter your preferred Email address in the space below :

FORM SUBMISSION

Thank you for taking the time to answer the questions in our survey.

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Appendix 3

“Help!”

to

Past and Present Property owners in France.



I am a University student currently working on my final year dissertation. The subject of my research is to investigate the reasons why British people purchase properties in France but also what makes it a success for some and a failure for others. Your own experiences are therefore vitally important to me.

If you would like to help, please ask for a questionnaire at the counter.

Many thanks in advance.

Appendix 4

Crosstabs

Notes

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do you still own the property? * would you buy again?

Crosstabulation

Count

		would you buy again?		Total
		yes	no	
do you still own the property?	yes	48		48
	no	6	3	9
Total		54	3	57

Crosstabs

Notes

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Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
do you still own the property? * would you buy again?	57	100.0%	0	.0%	57	100.0%

do you still own the property? * would you buy again? Crosstabulation

		would you buy again?		Total	
		yes	no		
do you still own the property?	yes	Count	48	48	
		% within do you still own the property?	100.0%	100.0%	
		% within would you buy again?	88.9%	84.2%	
		% of Total	84.2%	84.2%	
	no	Count	6	3	9
		% within do you still own the property?	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
		% within would you buy again?	11.1%	100.0%	15.8%
		% of Total	10.5%	5.3%	15.8%
Total	Count	54	3	57	
	% within do you still own the property?	94.7%	5.3%	100.0%	
	% within would you buy again?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	94.7%	5.3%	100.0%	

Crosstabs

Notes

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	Cases Used	Statistics for each table are based on all the cases with valid data in the specified range(s) for all variables in each table.
Syntax	CROSSTABS /TABLES=a12 BY a17 /FORMAT=AVALUE TABLES /STATISTIC=CHISQ /CELLS=COUNT ROW COLUMN TOTAL.	
Resources	Dimensions Requested	2
	Cells Available	116508
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Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
do you still own the property? * would you buy again?	57	100.0%	0	.0%	57	100.0%

do you still own the property? * would you buy again? Crosstabulation

			would you buy again?		Total
			yes	no	
do you still own the property?	yes	Count	48		48
		% within do you still own the property?	100.0%		100.0%
		% within would you buy again?	88.9%		84.2%
		% of Total	84.2%		84.2%
	no	Count	6	3	9
		% within do you still own the property?	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
		% within would you buy again?	11.1%	100.0%	15.8%
		% of Total	10.5%	5.3%	15.8%
Total	Count	54	3	57	
	% within do you still own the property?	94.7%	5.3%	100.0%	
	% within would you buy again?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	94.7%	5.3%	100.0%	

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16.889(b)	1	.000		
Continuity Correction(a)	10.865	1	.001		
Likelihood Ratio	12.049	1	.001		
Fisher's Exact Test				.003	.003
Linear-by-Linear Association	16.593	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	57				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 2 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .47.