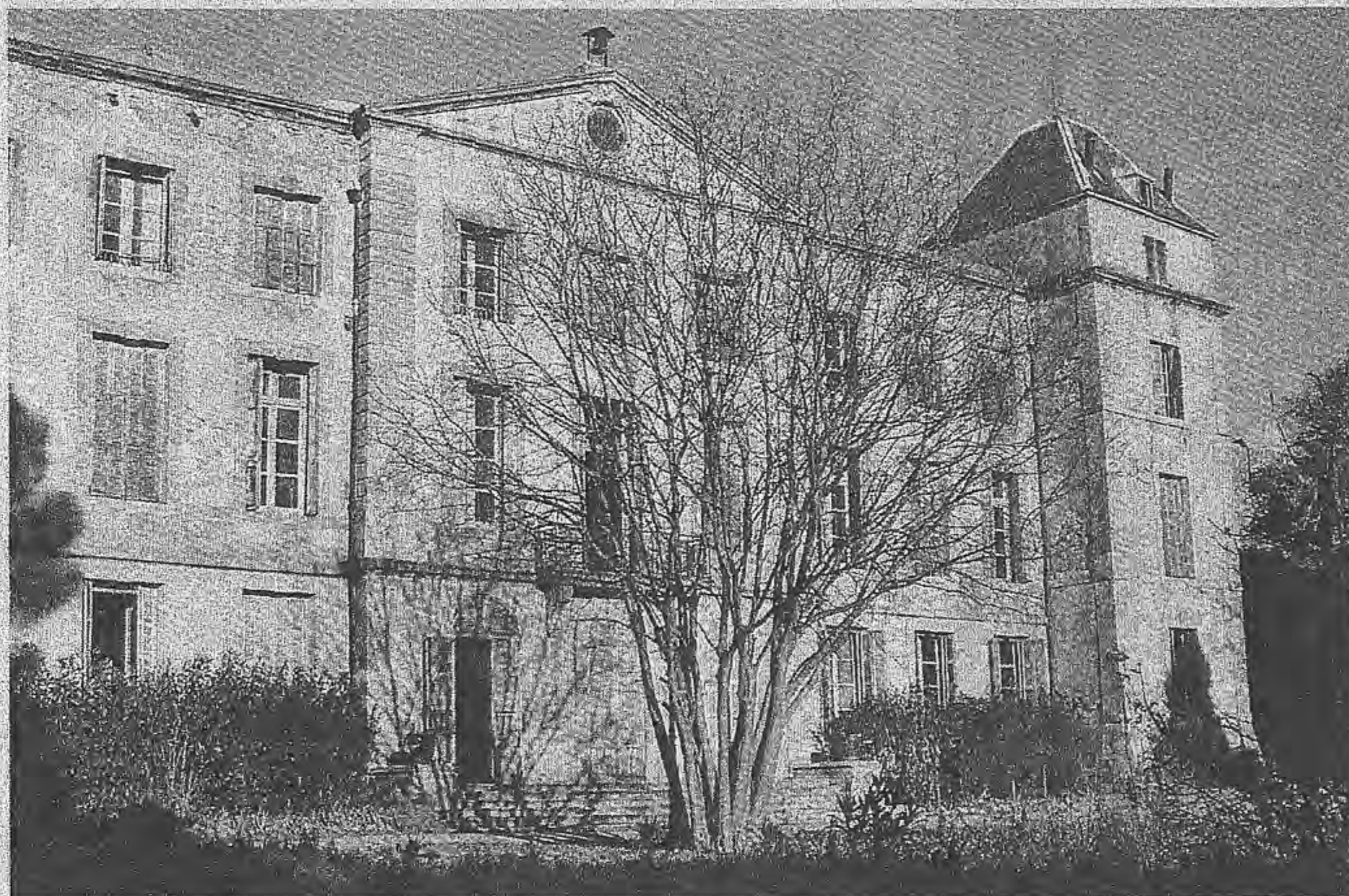
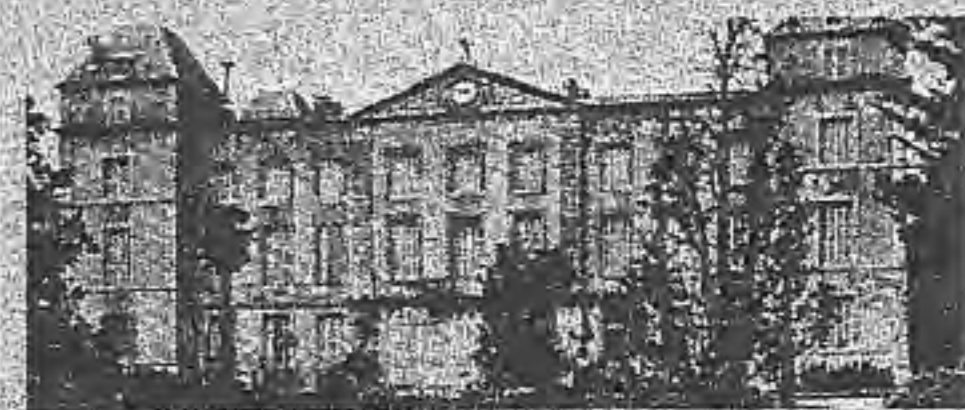


## OVERSEAS

## To the château born

A French countess is restoring her home in a property deal that will let you move in, too. **Laura Latham** drops by

Noble art (clockwise from left): Château de la Redorte now; as it will look, with one-bed flats from £195,000; in its heyday; and Countess Dominique d'Artois. Bottom: the Abbaye de Sainte-Croix



For Countess Dominique d'Artois, the upkeep of her family's 19th-century mansion has become too much to cope with. Over the past decades, she has witnessed the Château de la Redorte, home to seven generations of her family, fall into disrepair. The ornate salons where ladies used to take tea are tatty, the gardens are overgrown and the windows that once looked over the family's extensive vineyards are cracked and dirty.

It's a far cry from 1840, when the château was one of the loveliest in the Minervois, the renowned wine district in the Languedoc, southern France. Now it's mostly boarded up; the countess and her daughter's family live in the last inhabitable wing. But the Countess has a plan to stop the rot. And as a result you, too, might find yourself living here.

There are many financially strapped families with historic homes in the region, and the Countess has been approached by developers to sell the house for conversion into apartments, but they

all wanted an outright purchase, which would have forced her to leave the château for good. It wasn't a bargain she was prepared to make, so she held on, hoping for the right offer.

"It's very expensive to maintain such a large property," says the countess. "I could have sold it on several occasions, but I've worked hard to preserve the house and keep what's left of the estate."

As a result, Château de la Redorte is to be saved after all. A deal has been struck with Garrigae Investissements, which offered her the chance to retain possession of the wing she lives in and sell the property. The company plans to restore the house and grounds, while giving her the funds to remain. The Countess jumped at the chance.

Plans for the property include renovating the main building with its marbled entrance hall, billiards and music room, while adding four luxury penthouses. Two more wings will be built, each with 19 apartments, and there will be a pool and spa. The latter is reached

by a secret tunnel reputedly used by Countess d'Artois' ancestors to inspect their vineyards during a period of house arrest in the late 19th century.

With the developers ready to start work and buyers already putting down deposits, the countess is unfazed about strangers living in what was once the most exclusive private estate in the area. "The house needs to be alive," she explains. "Once, it would have been full of staff, family members and visitors. Now there's a chance to recreate not just the building, but the past spirit of my home."

Prices at Château de la Redorte start from £195,000 for a fully furnished, one-bedroom apartment with terrace, rising to £266,000 for two bedrooms. Homes are being sold on a leaseback basis, which means they can be placed in the developer's rental pool with 4.66 per cent guaranteed return.

Countess d'Artois is not the only ennobled owner to have approached Garrigae, which

is making a name for itself locally for its sensitive redevelopment of historic buildings. The company's next project, the Abbaye de Sainte-Croix, near Aix-en-Provence, is also being done with the cooperation of the current owner.

Catherine Bossard grew up in the abbey, which her parents turned into a family home and small hotel 30 years ago. Now, she is looking to secure its future prospects with new investment. After seeing family estates being successfully restored by developers, she decided to go down the same route.

There are now plans to turn the abbey's grounds into a residential resort, with the beautiful medieval building at its heart. The development will offer 60 homes - a mix of villas, townhouses and apartments - alongside the existing hotel and a new luxury spa. Prices haven't yet been released but Bossard is looking forward to seeing new life breathed into her

historic home. "I'm trusting Garrigae to develop the abbey without losing the authenticity my family worked so hard to safeguard over the years," she says.

Garrigae spokesman Karl O'Hanlon believes anyone wanting to own a property in this part of France, with its mountain scenery and easy access to the coast, will jump at the chance to have a stake in such properties without the hassle of maintaining them. "These are holiday homes that make sense," he says. "It's far easier to own in a managed scheme than to renovate or maintain an old property yourself." Countess d'Artois would undoubtedly agree.

Enquiries through Premier Resorts.  
www.premieresorts.co.uk; 0800 520 0614

## # Buyers' guide

■ Leaseback schemes offer tax breaks to buyers in France. Almost all new developments are now sold under this system, which was implemented by the French government to encourage investment.

■ Buyers of leasebacks don't have to pay the 19.5 per cent purchase tax, but to qualify for full relief you have to retain the property for at least nine years. Selling before that time incurs penalties of any outstanding tax.

■ Developers retain the right to rent out your leaseback property while offering

you a guaranteed return of 4 to 6 per cent per annum. Rental contracts usually last nine years and most will offer some personal use but the number of weeks and times of year will vary.

■ When purchasing leaseback property, always check the track record of the developer and research the local market to ensure there is demand for what you're buying.

