



## romantic renovation

**Anyone thinking of converting an Italian stone ruin into a comfortable home has to be seriously determined. If, in addition, you hail from London, cannot speak Italian and are unexpectedly alone, the determination factor needs to rise to almost superhuman levels.**

Step forward Penny Radford, the owner of what is now a most charming group of dwellings in northern Umbria, but which when she discovered them were uninhabitable. The 'romantic' ruins that she had fallen in love with had once been a small farmstead, with the remains of a farmhouse – which still had a roof, but little else – an old olive mill and a cottage.

'It was the usual story,' says Penny. 'I was in my early forties, working in marketing in London. I'd had enough, wanted to change my life, saw the ruins with this spectacular view, fell in love, sold up and moved here. Sadly, it also turned out to be the beginning of the end of my marriage.'

Undaunted, and partly because she had no option, she decided to stick with the project, both in converting the rubble-strewn site and in mastering, pretty quickly, the rudiments of working Italian, by enrolling on a language course at Perugia University. Obviously, it would not be possible to restore all the buildings in the group at the same time, so Penny decided to start with the main house and slowly move on from there. 'Actually, part of the main house had once been restored, hence



*Above and top Among the joys of Il Prato di Sotto are the local landscape and the magical views – both major factors in Penny Radford's decision to buy what was little more than a heap of ruins and bring them back to verdant life.*

*Left Although Il Prato has an air of historical permanency, Penny built it virtually from scratch. Everything in this part of the house is new, including the staircase and arched doorway; a 'footprint' of the old house was all she had to work on.*



the partial roof, but restored very badly; I had originally thought that I might be able to do a bit and then live in it – possibly make one apartment, and let out another; but I realized that would be in the future – originally there wasn't one room one could live in, never mind an apartment, and my most pressing concern was to make a couple of rooms habitable.' So, during that first winter, she endured makeshift accommodation, made basic improvements to the property and studied her verbs. Amazingly, by the end of the first year, she not only had somewhere to live but also another apartment that she could let out; she had also run out of money. But a small setback like that was not going to daunt the indomitable Penny; she decided to sell her remaining securities and, as she says, 'hang in there'.

Gradually the whole site began to take shape. As she finished the apartments, visitors came to rent them, which allowed her to pay first for the construction of the cottage and later the restoration of the old olive mill and the swimming pool. Five years on, phase one of Prato di Sotto was complete.

It was time to tackle the remaining original ruined farmhouse. The plan was for a house for two, with, on the ground floor, a large sitting room for entertaining, a small library/hall and a working kitchen with an Aga – vital in the cold Italian winter – and a dining room at one end. Upstairs there was to be one very large bedroom with fantastic views and a small dressing room leading to the bathroom complete with a

*This page and opposite It is hard to imagine that when Penny bought Il Prato di Sotto, there was almost nothing there – certainly no ceilings complete with old beams. This kitchen is comfortable, warm and practical, seemingly dusted with the layers of other generations' lives upon it. Neither Italian nor English, it combines elements of both – reclaimed-tile floors and, as well as an efficient cooking range, a traditional English Aga – essential for warmth in the often long winters – plus a traditional carpenter's bench. Beyond the main kitchen is a useful utility room where more modern practicalities such as refrigerators are situated.*





*Left and above The dominant feature of the airy, comfortable living room is the handsome fireplace, which is composed of different pieces of old stone, including a beautifully carved cornice. The unusual panels of colour flanking the fireplace are by Dorothy Hancock.*



*Right The dining hall, with another attractive old fireplace, has a 19th-century Umbrian dining table and straight-backed chairs covered in wide stripes.*

300-year-old stone sink, and a central studio above the kitchen. There was also to be another bedroom with its own outside entrance, a self-contained apartment, opening out onto the vegetable garden.

All this was constructed almost literally from nothing. 'The original, very old building on this site hadn't been touched for several centuries; there was only the outline of the original walls, which gave us the footprint of a long narrow room, and so we started from there.'

What can be seen today is really a complete reconstruction project, with some of the structural elements new, others, such as the flooring, reclaimed – and all looking perfectly in period.

Many of the ideas for the conversion and reconstruction came from Penny's builders. She was lucky. It is still unusual in Italy for a woman – and a foreigner to boot – to take on such major projects on her own. 'I had no idea how hard it would be to do things. You come to a country like this and it is a real culture shock. People often don't tell you the truth. Instead, they tell you what they think you want to hear; that's the Italian way. They don't phone and nothing is ever what it appears. The information is rarely accurate and neither are the estimates. But I got to know my builders and they helped immensely.'

She didn't employ the services of an architect, since she felt that she knew quite well enough what she wanted, and the



*Above* Reclaimed and restored pieces are found in abundance. In this simple bathroom, the basin is in fact an 18th-century stone sink, backed by 20th-century tiles. Above it is a late 19th-century French mirror.

*Above right* The study is warm and comfortable, again a mix of Italian and English styles, with its patterned upholstered chairs and red-toned rug, heavy beams and tiled floor.

*Right* Penny's bedroom has spectacular views; curtains are almost unnecessary. To the right of the window hangs her collection of early 20th-century watercolours. The chest at the end of the bed is Italian and 16th century.

finished version is extremely accomplished. The decoration is a combination of the rural and the formal—an interesting amalgam of English country style and Italian sophistication, with elements from other cultures and countries introduced to the mix. Penny is also fortunate in having come from an art school background, and the colours that she has used throughout the property reflect this. They may be warm and earthy, but with a subtlety that marks them out from many another restored house.

The furniture and furnishings are different too: Penny has always collected furniture, and she brought many of her pieces over with her from England, as well as judiciously buying some Italian pieces to suit the rustic setting. The result is much warmer and more comfortable than is often the case, with deep cushioned sofas, rich-patterned kelims and full curtains. Even her choice of art is individual, with pictures ranging from groups of 20th-century watercolours to the two striking red canvases on either side of the fireplace – Dorothy Hancock's colour field panels, each consisting of many carefully applied, rich layers of paint.

Now that Penny has completed this mammoth restoration task, you might imagine that she would be content to sit back and enjoy the beauty that she has created at Prato di Sotto, and encourage others to do likewise. But that would be far from the truth. Instead, she has set up a restoration business helping Britons and Americans to find and renovate properties in the area. She is presently restoring another ruin for a client. Thank goodness, some people never learn.