



The long and winding road

As removals firm Burke Bros celebrates a landmark anniversary, co-founder **Gary Burke** looks back at four decades of moves to and from France

A gentleman planning a move from the UK to central France in his 100th year recently contacted us at Burke Bros Moving Group.

He remembered seeing our removals firm in an edition of *French Property News* that he'd kept. Because of his age, I went to visit him personally and he showed me the clipping. It was from 1991, a black and white advert that he'd kept and remembered for 30 years!

BACK TO THE FUTURE

In fact, Burke Bros goes back further than that. We celebrate our 40th anniversary this year. Back in 1982, when my brother Chris and I founded the company in the West Midlands, mobile phones were primitive prototypes, the internet was a research project and Michelin Guide maps were used to navigate rural France. The idea of looking around a French

farmhouse by video link from the comfort of your sofa in the UK was a distant dream.

Britain was hit by recession in the early 1980s and again in the early 90s, and the property bargains over the Channel became too good to miss. France became an increasingly appealing option for British expats, leading to thousands of families relocating to France.

Amid the economic uncertainty, the first issue of *French Property News* was published in June 1989, an eight-page newspaper in black and white. It was a far cry from the glossy magazine of today, but the publication was highly informative from the outset.

FPN founder Dick Schrader organised the first French Property Exhibitions shortly after and Burke Bros Moving Group was one of the very first exhibitors. The original venue - the basement of the Novotel in Hammersmith - was

rather cramped and smoky. But with access to solicitors, ferry companies, removers and other experts giving free advice, the exhibitions quickly became the most authoritative point of reference for people moving to France. We have seen many agents and advisors come and go since then, but also the emergence of new industries such as currency companies.

CHUNNEL HOPPING

Another turning point for us was the completion of the Eurotunnel. Since its official opening in 1994, more than 80 million vehicles have travelled through it, including a great many of our vans.

The 1990s also saw the EU barriers coming down. The Maastricht Treaty was signed on February 7, 1992, creating the European Union, with the creation of the Single European Market by the end of the year.

Burke Bros removal vans

were crossing the Continent with regular services and were the first company to have road train trailers (a truck with a trailer attached), but it was not all plain sailing. There were a fair few French farmer strikes that brought the country to a standstill and would sometimes maroon the removal crews in France. This wasn't the only obstacle their removal drivers faced. In the days before debit cards, the drivers had to carry cash and there were reports of drivers being mugged and even gassed in the vans.

Against the backdrop of technological, political and economic change, we have, of course, met some wonderful and interesting customers.

One customer quite literally take part of her home county of Yorkshire with her, as Burke Bros vans were packed with 600 plants to make the journey over to France. Another customer opted for a rather

unconventional approach to packing, using 46 wheelie bins to help transport his possessions and workshop tools to France. When upping sticks from Buckinghamshire to his new home near Toulouse, he decided not to use regular removal boxes but green wheelie bins instead, reasoning that it would save him a great deal of time when it came to loading up the removals truck on moving day.

Although it was a novel way to pack personal possessions, it's not the kind of packing material we can see taking off for a typical family moving to France. The customer initially planned to sell the wheelie bins locally in France, once the contents had been unpacked, but actually found they made ideal water butts in the acre or so of land he had surrounding his new French home and workshop.

FELLOW FRANCOPHILES

Through the French Property Exhibitions and France Show, we've also made many friends in fellow businesses, who have witnessed the changing market alongside us.

Matthew Cameron, Partner and Head of French Legal Services at Ashton's Legal, told me: "I have seen buyers becoming more sophisticated and discerning, showing an increasing interest in the finer details of a move to France. In



Gary with the France Show can-can girls

"He wants to take the ladders he used to climb into his Lancaster bomber during the war"

the current climate, this can only be a good thing."

Steve Gillham said the demographics of buyers visiting his Alliance French Property stand at the exhibitions has also changed. "The age group is mostly under 50, professional people who are looking to develop a property to provide income or relocate their business," he said. "Therefore, we are getting more involved with their planning and undertaking specific property searches backed up with feasibility studies taking in legal, planning and

construction considerations as well as providing project costs."

Of course, the pandemic put a stop to the exhibitions altogether, hopefully a temporary blip in their history, as Carolyn Pratt of Idimmo Prestige & Châteaux agrees. "The FPN exhibitions have provided a central point for people who wish to buy in France, to speak to 'actual' people and get their advice, opinions and help rather than relying just on the written word," she said. "Let's hope that we will be able to see a return of the exhibitions soon."



Changing Rooms star Anna Ryder Richardson with Burke Bros Moving Group's Ben Hingley at the France Show

Brexit has brought about another twist in the tale for those moving to France, as Richard Hammond of French Connections HCB told me. "There was definitely a 'before' and 'after' Brexit. So much was changing so fast, and many clients despaired of being able to navigate the new rules. We have a great relationship with the French administration, so we are always up to date with new rules and regulations and can smooth the way," he said.

As for the 100-year-old client I visited recently, he is certainly not going to let Brexit or pandemics stand in his way. Among the belongings he wants to take to his new property in France are the ladders he used to climb into his Lancaster bomber while serving in the Second World War. He also wants to take his set of golf clubs - he hasn't used them for 20 years but said: "You never know!"

Hundreds of paintings will also be making the journey as he has been a keen artist throughout his life, and his Black and Decker Workmate as it's still in use.

We were really taken by his story and his decision to embrace the challenge and move to his favourite country in his 100th year.

Many things may have changed over the decades, but what has remained is the ever-enduring appeal of the French way of life. *Vive la France!* ■

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The company carries out hundreds of moves a year to France