

9

Trisha Mason

Founder of VEF

When Trisha Mason fell in love with a derelict watermill during a holiday in France 15 years ago, she knew instantly that she had to buy it. It was not the most sensible decision to make. The mill had been left to rot for 40 years and had doors hanging off their hinges. And she was single-handedly bringing up two small children in London, having been widowed a few years earlier at the age of 29. She was making a modest living as a freelance management consultant and had little money to spare. But the mill had turrets and a clock tower, and she was hooked. She says: 'I decided that even if the property fell down around my ears we would still have 18 acres of land. We could put a caravan on it and be happy there.'

Mason bought the watermill for £45,000 and spent the next few summers renovating it with the help of friends. When those friends asked her to help them buy properties of their own in France, Mason decided to see if she could make some extra money that way. So she placed an advert in the paper offering her services as a property scout. She says: 'In the early days I used to meet clients at Dover and



then drive them down to the mill in Limousin in my car. They would stay with me and I would cook them five-course meals and then take them out to look at properties for two or three days. Then I would drive them all the way back to England again. It was exhausting.'

But Mason had always relished a challenge. When her children were small she decided to start a business selling childrenswear and used to stay up all night making clothes. Then, when they began preparing for their O and A levels she opted to take a psychology degree at the same time so that they could all study together round the kitchen table. She admits to being driven by a fear of being bored, saying: 'I have very high energy levels. I love adventure and am always looking for the next challenge. I'm very directed and fast in everything I do. I can't bear people who can't keep up with me.'

Indeed, it was clear to others that she would be a success in business long before she realised it herself. She says that when she was just 19 years old Sir Terence Conran refused

to give her a job as his secretary, saying that if he were to employ her she would probably try to take over his job. Mason says: 'When I got the letter from him turning me down, I rang up and insisted on speaking to him in person to ask why. But it would have been a disaster. He was very astute to recognise it.'

As interest grew in her property consultancy, Mason started taking stands at French property exhibitions in Britain. She quickly realised that the service she was offering in Limousin could be extended to other parts of France. She sold the family home in London and opened three offices, in Charente, Brittany and Normandy, investing the £100,000 equity to set up *Vivre En France*, now known as VEF.

She says now: 'That was a big jump. I invested all of the equity from the house in the business.' She never doubted, however, that the business would be a success and thinks her confidence stems from the tragedy of having being widowed at a young age. She says: 'When you lose the most important thing in your life, the loss of anything else isn't terribly important.'

Happily, her timing was perfect and VEF expanded just as the idea of buying a home in France started to capture the British public's imagination. 'It was lucky it happened when it did. People's interest in buying in France was just taking off and we were really in at the beginning.'

Right from the start Mason opted to do things her way, recruiting native English speakers to run VEF's offices in France as stand-alone businesses, instead of setting up partnerships with local French estate agents as rival companies have done. These guide buyers through the whole purchasing process from translating to legal work for an inclusive fee. She says: 'Most of our clients don't speak French and they need to have someone to hold their hand.'

It is a formula that has worked well. VEF now has 25 offices across France and Mason has added to the business in several ways. In 2005 Mason set up Validus Invest with her son Jake to sell investment property in Central and Eastern Europe. It has an affiliated company, Validus Financial Services, a mortgage brokerage dealing in France, Poland and Spain. Then in 2008 she started up Venturus, a French property company which provides a no-frills alternative to the VEF structure for more independent buyers who are more experienced at buying property overseas.

Mason admits that the overseas property market is not the easiest place to be in the current economic climate but is optimistic that her spread of businesses puts VEF in the best position to weather the storm. Turnover for 2009 is expected to be around £8 million.

Now 63, Mason divides her time between London and the south of France. She says: 'Every time I tell people I

Fact File

Date of birth: 22 April 1945

Marital status: widowed with two children

Highest level of education achieved: university

Qualifications: BSc in Psychology from North East London Polytechnic

Interests: growing her own organic vegetables, cultivating her vineyards and olive groves

Personal philosophy: 'Life is about giving other people inspiration to do whatever they want to do well. I like inspiring people to achieve things.'

might let my team take over running the company, they ask what I'm going to start next. I have definitely got one more project in me but next time round I would like to do something which is not necessarily about making money. I guess I need to earn my place in heaven with this one. I would just really like to feel that I had done something which had made a real difference to people.'